THE WIFE AND THE MISTRESS.

A NOVEL.

LANE, MINERVA-PRESS, LEADENHALL-STREET.

Eliza Gifford Verquis Flintshire 1807

THE WIFE AND THE MISTRESS.

A Novel.

IN FOUR VOLUMES.

BY MARY CHARLTON,

AUTHOR OF THE PIRATE OF NAPLES, ROSELLA, ANDRONICA, &c. &c.

"——Celebrare domestica facta."

HORACE.

"We find fit subjects for our verse at home."

ROSCOMMON.

VOL. IV.

Second Edition.

LONDON:
PRINTED AT THE
Minerva-Press,
FOR LANE AND NEWMAN,
LEADENHALL-STREET.
1803.

823
C386w
1803
v.9

THE WIFE

AND

THE MISTRESS.

CHAP. I.

A CONSIDERABLE time had elapsed unheeded by Laura, and she still continued absorbed in a meditation which the appearance of Dolly, who attended to change her dress for dinner, at length interrupted: she then started in surprise at the lateness of the hour, and mechanically suffered Mrs. Maunder to perform her office.

The sagacious attendant soon discovered that she was unusually pensive and absent;

but far from lamenting it, as she generally was wont to do, she took advantage of the circumstance to adorn the passive Laura to the best advantage; because Mrs. Maunder had witnessed the arrival of Biranly, and whilst she meant to add to the satisfaction she imagined her young Lady would certainly experience on seeing him, by a pleasing surprise, she was likewise resolved to rivet yet more firmly the long-remembered attachment of this devoted swain, whose success she felt much interested in: because, in the first place, he was a Lord's son, without a crumb of pride or ill-nature; and, secondly, because she thought it would be very funny to set off to Scotland with Miss Laura, who was gently reproved, *en attendant*, for discomposing her hair from time to time, which had been combed into twenty different forms by the *suivante*, who was a little angry and impatient too, when her young Lady repeatedly put the wrong arm into the offered sleeve.

At length the last dinner-bell urged Mrs. Maunder to complete her labours. "There,

"There, Ma'am," cried she, "now I do declare I never saw you look so iligant or so handsome!"

This exclamation, uttered in a very exulting tone, induced Laura to cast a look into the mirror Dolly officiously presented to her.

"What have you been doing?" said she, in a chagrined accent: "I cannot appear thus!"

"Ma'am, there's company," returned Mrs. Maunder hastily; "and besides you haven't time to *halter* any thing now, for here's John come to call you down."

Laura, regardless of this information, disengaged as many ornaments as the time would permit, notwithstanding the earnest remonstrances of the disappointed Dolly, and descended to the eating-saloon, where she found Mrs. Bergarde, Lady Mary Mornay and her father, Biranly, Mrs. Cruden, and a very unpleasant looking saturnine visaged man, with whose name she was unacquainted.

This unexpected assemblage, and the little hurry into which the too great zeal

of Mrs. Maunder had thrown her, diverted in some measure the emotion the idea of again meeting Lady Melville had renewed; and without much apparent agitation, she seated herself at the table. Biranly, who was her immediate neighbour, by repeated efforts to gain her attention, at length succeeded; and he then informed her that he had received a few lines from his friend Rothemere but the preceding day, who had charged him with remembrances and good wishes to herself.

At the name of Rothemere Laura sighed; and recollecting that he was the husband of her mother, asked, with more real interest than she had ever yet felt for him, if he had recovered from the effects of his accident; but when Biranly replied to her enquiry, his voice, aspect, and manner recalled so forcibly many scenes in which her lately discovered mother had taken a share, that it was with great difficulty she could restrain the tears that rushed to her eyes: her countenance varied, however, and

and Biranly perceived the tremor that had seized her.

"You still retain some symptoms of your recent malady," said he, in some alarm; "you are indisposed!"

Laura exerted herself to deny this surmise with some appearance of truth; but his exclamation had excited general attention, and she was compelled to repeat more than once that she was in perfect health, though her languid eye and pale cheek contradicted the assertion.

Lord Glendarvon was unusually silent during the repast; but his taciturnity was very amply compensated by the volubility of his daughter, who discussed with her usual ease every topic within her comprehension and capacity, and many others far beyond them. Her *étourderie* sometimes attracted a smile of applause from Biranly; but he rendered to Laura so decided a homage, that with a countenance all sunshine and vivacity, Lady Mary experienced internally all the discomposure of rage and envy.

Mrs. Cruden, who had been hitherto

very prudently waiting to observe how the *poor thing* was regarded by Lady Melville, finding that she was neither brow-beaten nor neglected, made several advances to renew an amicable intercourse with her: but her condescensions were ill repaid by the object of them, who could only rally her spirits sufficiently to reply to her in little more than a monosyllable; and Mrs. Bergarde, observing that the persevering civilities of *good* Mrs. Cruden distressed Laura, relieved her from them with much good-nature, by attracting the attentions of this complaisant gentlewoman to herself.

When Lady Melville withdrew, the grave stranger, who had been addressed by her as Mr. Wilmer, was deputed master of the ceremonies: and indeed he had received from the Countess so many marks of consideration, that Laura could not avoid experiencing some surprise that she had never seen or heard of him before this day; as her inexplicable Ladyship, speaking to him of her younger daughters, repeatedly mentioned them as his old friend Lady Sophia, and his little favourite

Lady

Lady Madalina; though his aspect and demeanour seemed to intimate that he never had either favourite or friend in the course of a life, which, to every appearance, had been extended to almost seventy years.

When the female part of the society reached the drawing-room, Lady Mary having now lost the principal motives of her forced complacency, which were the presence of her father, and the hope of exciting the admiration of Biranly, yet not chusing to be betrayed into any expression of her real sentiments, affected to be dying with lassitude; and declaring that she had not been in bed ten hours for the last three nights, by the advice of Lady Melville threw herself upon a sofa, and sunk into a very well-feigned slumber.

Mrs. Cruden now took occasion to express a very enthusiastic admiration of her beauty and various graces; and when the subject was entirely exhausted, she thought proper to turn her eulogiums into another channel: and having expatiated for some time upon the enchantments of dear Lady

Melville's elegant *campagne*, entreated that she might be indulged with a survey of the apartments, and the lovely prospects to be viewed from the upper windows.

Dear Lady Melville would willingly have deferred this ceremony to another day: but it so happened that *good* Mrs. Cruden was not at this moment to be slighted or checked; for she had recently received advice of the recovery of a considerable sum of money which, on her leaving India, had been considered as wholly lost. Under the pressure of such a circumstance, Lady Melville was all gentleness, suavity, and indulgence; and whilst she made the tour of the house with good Mrs. Cruden, Laura was invited to walk upon the lawn with the fair widow Bergarde—an overture she readily accepted, rather than hazard the effect of her own reflections whilst she must necessarily be so much observed.

When they lost sight of the mansion, Mrs. Bergarde, extending her hand with a friendly aspect, dropped the general subject

subject upon which they had until then conversed.

"I wish not to distress you by any unwelcome observation," said she; "but you must allow me to remark that I fear you did not reply with exact truth to the enquiries your appearance at dinner excited. Tell me, my amiable Miss Delaunie, has your late indisposition so entirely vanished, as you have asserted?"

"Indeed, Madam," replied Laura, "I feel no traces of it; I was merely affected by remembrances."

"Why do you thus start and retreat?" demanded Mrs. Bergarde, regarding her earnestly.

"That walk appears gloomy," returned Laura, in a trembling voice; "the sun is setting; will you not rather return by the same path?"

"Not unless you particularly object to this avenue," said Mrs. Bergarde: "it appears exactly calculated to become a favourite promenade with me."

Laura thus urged, endeavoured to repress her reluctance, and entered the

shaded path her steps had traced in the morning: but she involuntarily gazed round her in earnest thought, which her companion observed without interrupting; and at length, unable to endure the doubt and suspense that had hitherto tormented her, she enquired of Mrs. Bergarde whither the fields led which bounded the shrubbery on that side.

"I believe," replied she, with a careless air, and half-averted look, "they form part of the grounds of Rodenwach House. Have you," she added, turning suddenly to Laura with a smiling aspect, "any peculiar reason for this enquiry? The paling is of a convenient height, I observe. Oh! there is confirmation in that deep blush!—you have a design upon the peace of poor Nevarc, and you think the neighbourhood a favourable circumstance."

Laura was unable to reply to this raillery; and Mrs. Bergarde continued with a more serious air—

"You are not, I suppose, in the habit of making *confidentes* without due motives and reasons, or I might perhaps, my fair Laura,

Laura, demand of your sincerity a confession of the hidden cause of that inquietude which so evidently oppresses you."

"Ah, Madam!" replied Laura, the tears bursting from her eyes, "my heart is full, and requires but little urging to vent its anguish to whomever deigns to solicit it with kind and friendly intentions!"

"Mine are such, my dear child," resumed Mrs. Bergarde; "and to prove to you my sincerity, I will acknowledge that there has been a moment in our acquaintance with each other, when I did not entertain that opinion of you which now impels me to a wish of serving you.—Good God! here is Lady Melville! the tongue of her companion announces her:—conceal your agitation—turn into that avenue, my young friend, and regain the house. I do not wish her to observe that you are weeping in a *tête-à-tête* with me."

Laura instantly complied with this injunction; and with a ray of hope that the friendship of Mrs. Bergarde might perhaps

serve her, she proceeded with a lighter step to rejoin Lady Mary, that her patroness, on finding them together, might not suspect how long she had remained with her cousin.

When she had bathed her eyes with water, to remove the appearance of distress she now endeavoured to conceal with a more circumspect care, she moved towards the drawing-room; and the deepening twilight favoured her wish of escaping the comments and enquiries of Lady Mary.

On entering the apartment, she found her Ladyship conversing in a low voice with a gentleman, who occupied a seat upon the same sofa with herself; but whether it were Lord Glendarvon, Mr. Wilmer, or Biranly, she could not distinguish even upon a nearer approach. Lady Mary did not suffer her, however, to remain long in suspense; for with a laugh of childish gaiety, she informed Laura that she had been intercepting some very obliging compliments that had been designed for her ear alone.

"But

"But if Captain Biranly thinks them very much misplaced," added she, "I will repeat them to you with great exactness, and acknowledge that you are their original proprietor."

The gentleman, who had started when she first addressed Laura in her usual tone, now concealed his chagrin by asserting that no expression of admiration could be misplaced to Lady Mary Mornay.

She received this compliment with great complacency; and taking the hand of Laura, declared that she had been so prettily amused, that it was with the utmost difficulty she could muster proper contrition for her offence.

"You cannot guess," continued she, "what charming things he has been saying to me."

Laura, disgusted with the forwardness and unqualified assurance of the young lady, and reflecting with alarm upon what might have been the event of this amusement, had her presence not undeceived Biranly—fearing too, that the substitution, with some little perversion of fact, might

might afford a subject of detraction for the society of Mrs. Meedon, and from thence find its way into the world, knew not what to say, until the solicitations of Lady Mary for pardon urged her to speak; and she then observed that she did not experience such renovated spirits as to join in a laugh which she supposed to be against herself; but she hoped both Mr. Biranly and Lady Mary would excuse her stupidity, and continue their *persiflage* if it gratified them.

"Oh! I am sure you are quite angry," exclaimed Lady Mary, "or you would not answer me in that grave manner! But upon my word I can remember every sentence that he uttered, and I will repeat it with the accompanying action, and all the pathos."

"Will your Ladyship have the goodness likewise," interrupted Biranly, who was both provoked and disappointed by her *finesse*, to induce Miss Delaunie to adopt the very favourable sentiments you were so condescending to express in her name?"

"Certainly,

"Certainly, if I can," returned she, with infinite *nonchalance*. "I am sure no one can with justice complain of my ill-nature or fastidiousness, for I am universally acknowledged to be the most obliging creature in the world! Now, my sweet friend, you must not retain your displeasure; I shall break my heart if you do not instantly forgive me."

"What offence have you committed?" asked Lord Glendarvon, who now joined the party, accompanied by Mr. Wilmer.

"Oh, it was the most innocent thing in the world," returned she, in a tone of affected simplicity: "Captain Biranly entered the room a few minutes back, and as I discerned who he was, notwithstanding the twilight, I thought he might equally recognise my unhappy physiognomy: and when he uttered a number of fine sentiments, and accompanied them with the most delightful panegyric, I did not immediately recollect that I ought to proclaim myself, and arrest the sublime effusions that could not certainly be meant for me: and the consequence of this

this culpable omission is, that both Miss Delaunie and himself are very angry with me for not having a better guard on my vanity !"

This vivacious speech, far from producing a pleasant retort, or enlivening any of the party, had the effect that was perhaps intended; for Laura was too much distressed and confused to make any comment. Biranly was enraged at her effrontery; and the servants now entering with lights, discovered the countenance of Lord Glendarvon agitated by no very agreeable passions, whilst Mr. Wilmer regarded the ladies with scorn, and the object of their apparent contention with secret contempt.

A pause ensued, which was broken by the entrance of Lady Melville and her companions; and the subject was not farther discussed by any one, excepting Lady Mary, who from time to time tormented Laura with whispered entreaties to mollify the resentment of the inflexible Biranly, who evidently avoided her advances to a reconciliation.

Mrs.

Mrs. Bergarde had not any opportunity of renewing her interrupted conversation with Laura, who had the mortification of seeing her depart in the evening without any indication of regard; and she began to fear that her enquiries might have proceeded from curiosity alone, or the cruel artifice that so often induces people to sooth and flatter, in the hope of that confidence they have no other intention but of hearing and betraying. Yet the character of Mrs. Bergrade did not appear to justify this suspicion, which the impatience of Laura under her present subjugation urged her to form, and her despair of escaping from it ere the machinations of Lady Melville overwhelmed her. There was, on the contrary, in the countenance of Mrs. Bergarde, an air of united good humour and levity, that should have precluded the idea of treachery: but Laura had witnessed such general and happy efforts of consummate hypocrisy in her intercourse with women of fashion, which were called in the fashionable vocabulary *manner*, *tone*, *style*, and *tournure*,

tournure, that she might perhaps have been justified in her doubts, especially as she had never yet had an opportunity of observing the unguarded expressions of her aspect, or hearing the accents of her voice, in the overpowering situation of a domestic wrangle.

Lady Mary accompanied her cousin to town. Mrs. Cruden departed at the same time, in the fear of being robbed; and as Mr. Wilmer had vanished the moment he had swallowed his coffee, there remained only at nine o'clock, Lord Glendarvon and Biranly, who, regarding each other with every apparent jealousy and distrust, seemed each unwilling to quit the field.

The young man at length addressing himself to Laura, said that he hoped to see Mrs. Hamilton the next morning, and asked if she would entrust him with a billet, or a verbal communication to that lady.

Laura felt her heart throb at this intimation, yet hesitated to pronounce the sentence that hovered on her lips; whilst Lady

Lady Melville turned from Lord Glendarvon, to whom she was speaking, and in a very alert tone, affirmed that her young friend should accompany her to the house of Mrs. Hamilton in a day or two.

"Miss Delaunie will therefore merely thank you to convey the usual remembrances. But," she added, "I have not yet found an opportunity of speaking to you, Captain Biranly, of your amiable mother: her Ladyship was one of my youthful friends; and I regretted exceedingly that I was so unfortunate as to miss seeing her when she was last in England. When you write, do not forget, I entreat you, to remind her Ladyship of her former companion and intimate, Emily Dar ley.'

Biranly promised to recollect this injunction, and give his mother the satisfaction of learning that she yet retained a place in the memory of Lady Melville, who continued the conversation, even after the repetition of this promise, with a tenacity that seemed to weary every one but herself.

Lord

Lord Glendarvon not observing any appearance of a speedy conclusion to the topic, at length rose to depart, and very politely proposed to give Biranly a seat in his chariot, as the young man had left town on horseback, and had been unexpectedly and most pleasantly detained to dinner—a circumstance his dress had occasioned to be announced.

The proposition was seconded by the recommendation of Lady Melville; and as Biranly could not refuse it, he was compelled to appear to avail himself with acknowledgment, of a compliment he was well enabled to appreciate; and his immediate departure gave much satisfaction to the self-acknowledged friend of his mother, and to Lord Glendarvon, who were equally averse that he should obtain any further conversation with the disappointed Laura; whilst she accused herself of simply throwing away an opportunity of conveying a hint to her friend, by the want of presence of mind.

The conduct of Lady Melville now every moment confirmed her apprehensions

and

and her misery; and the promptitude and openness with which she had intercepted any communication to Mrs. Hamilton, gave her a yet more formidable idea of her art and resolution. To complete her dreadful inquietude, she was now assured that she must be perpetually subjected to the presence of Lord Glendarvon, who on quitting the room, suddenly stepped back, and begged Lady Melville would allow him a conference if possible the next morning, and he would attend her appointed hour.

She readily assented to this request; and having fixed the time, his Lordship departed with a smiling air, and certain triumphant presentiments, which enabled him to view the handsome figure of his companion as they drove towards town, with less indignation than he might otherwise perhaps have experienced.

CHAP.

CHAP. II.

WHEN Laura rose the next morning, she was but little disposed to attend to the prattle of Dolly, who chose, however, to animadvert with her usual freedom upon the guests of the preceding day.

"Well, Ma'am," said she, with a very significant air, "and how does Captain Biranly do?—Well, I did get a peep at him, and I think he looks handsomer than ever. To be sure there an't nothing like Lunnon to set folks off! if they gets ever so rustyish in the country, they always brightens up in Lunnon! Why the men says, Ma'am, that Lady Mary was setting her cap at him all dinner time; but, knowing what I know, she'll never get him,

him, if you'll only be a little civil, Ma'am."

"Pray, Dolly, do not torment me thus!" exclaimed Laura, in a more peevish tone than she had ever yet used to her faithful attendant.

"Lauk, Ma'am, I don't want to teaze you, I'm sure," returned Mrs. Maunder, rather offended; "I thought I might just say as much as that, as I have tended and been consarned with you here a matter of seven or eight years. I was going for to tell you about Mr. Wilmer; but you are so down in the mouth, that there's no pleasure in talking to you a bit!"

"What of Mr. Wilmer?" asked Laura, in some alarm.

"Why, Ma'am," resumed Dolly, in a tone of great alacrity, at being thus encouraged to unfold her intelligence, "you must know he's a sort of——that's to say, he is, you see, Ma'am, he's an *agin* of my Lady Melville's, and somewhat of a lawyer, and a land-steward of Earl Stiff-back, as we calls him: and besides, he's the Dowager's *hom d'affy*, (that's Frinch, Ma'am, for

for a gentleman of business); and so they says, as sure as he sets foot in the house where her Ladyship bides, there's some trade or other going on that an't to see daylight in a hurry."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Laura, in terror.

"Lauk, Miss Laura, I hope you won't mintion a word of it though; for they'd murder me if they know'd I told you any thing!—Well, Ma'am, says John to me—'He's to make up a parchment lease of this place,' says he, or somewhat of that; 'and by-and-by, my life for't, it will turn out to be my Lady's, see if it don't!'—But then, to be sure, John has a spite against Mr. Wilmer for making up his old uncle's will in such a way, that he never got a farthing of the money; and because he wou'dn't stay there to be flouted, he was glad to go to sarvice, and Mr. Wilmer got him a place with my Lady; but then you see, Ma'am, they served him such a trick as was enough to make him stark angry, for they bound him by a parchment writing to sarve his Lady for twelve year at

ten pounds a year—that was when he first came to Lunnon, and thought it enough till he was told better! So t'other day he was talking of Minton; and there, behold ye, I found out he knows all my kin, and I knows hissen; so we don't mind telling each other our minds, as we come from the same country, and are old acquaintance like. And you know, Miss Laura, it's very hard upon him; for his uncle was a farmer, and had saved a mort of money, and bringing up John for all the world like his own, every body thought he would have it all: and behold, it was all hugger muggered away, and now her Ladyship won't give him a farthing more than the ten pounds; and the footmen of his acquaintance calls him 'prentice Jack, and that puts him quite beside himself!"

This history, which at another moment Laura would have found very uninteresting, now impressed still deeper the dark opinions she had by this time imbibed of Lady Melville, her designs, connections, principles, and actions: and sensible as she was of the imprudence of appearing

to encourage the repetition of such tales, she had not spirits enough to check the tongue of Mrs. Maunder, who continued her details with impunity, until her young Lady left her apartment to attend the breakfast table.

Lady Melville readily discerned the disorder of her mind; but prudently forbore at a juncture she believed to be very important, to endanger a *fracas*, or any premature *éclaircissement* of her plans, by appearing to perceive discontent or distress in the countenance or manner of her young guest, whom she endeavoured to sooth by the delicacy of those silent attentions that often steal into the heart, spite of prejudice or conviction. To divert her mind from wholly dwelling upon subjects Lady Melville would willingly have entirely driven thence, she gave her a commission to arrange a small library, which had passed into her possession with other appurtenances of the mansion, and to make out a classed index of the books: and whilst Laura endeavoured to collect herself to perform the task with tolerable

tolerable accuracy, her Ladyship prepared to receive her expected visitor, of whose business she believed herself perfectly *au fait*.

She fully expected that he meant to avow himself the honourable suitor of Laura; and congratulated herself in advance upon the happy effect probably resulting from the passion and pretensions of Biranly, of which she had availed herself to hasten the declaration of Lord Glendarvon, because she knew she might without any hazard allow of his visits and attentions to Laura, as she had well ascertained that he was not the formidable being whose presence would endanger the success of even a titled rival.

Her project had been entirely well laid with respect to the noble lover, who was, in treacherous security, daily increasing his admiration, but without any very decided plan, until the unwelcome appearance of a younger and more handsome *adorateur* suddenly introduced the torment of jealousy and apprehension in his heart—a torment that was not at all

diminished by the accidental circumstances that gave him to suppose that the love of the audacious pretender was well received; for his Lordship thought he had discovered that Laura had taken peculiar pains with her toilet when she joined the dinner-party; he had perceived her varying emotions when Biranly addressed her at the table; and he believed the assertions of his daughter, that she was displeased with the artifice that deprived her of the pleasure of hearing from the lips of her youthful admirer, the attestations of the attachment she meant to reward.

The reflections resulting from these circumstances inspired Lord Glendarvon with the highest indignation and rage: that a fellow who was scarcely able to vie with his *valet-de-chambre* in any expenditure upon his *grisette* adventures, should presume to raise his regards, and what was still more insolent, intercept the favourable sentiments of the woman who had attracted his attention, was not to be endured! And as Laura happened to be

the

the loveliest girl he had seen for a considerable time, he resolved to pension off two or three courtesans who had claims, or affected to have them, upon his liberality, and spite of any apprehended alienation of her heart, instantly marry her, to vindicate the superior rights of rank and wealth. The almost immediate neglect that would probably follow, was what every reasonable woman might expect; she might therefore provide against that by retaining her first *attachment*, and in due time, by furnishing judicial eloquence with the utmost extent of field for the high-wrought pathetic, give herself the opportunity of rewarding at length, the faithful passion which had so long smothered in hot embers, and return my Lord his liberty with a smile and a low curtsy.

But all this was mere perspective: the present object was to snatch her from the presumptuous hopes of a poor unfortunate dog, who had nothing but the impertinence of youth and good looks to second him, and to secure her to himself: and with this intention, he very punctually

attended his appointment with that amiable woman, Lady Melville, who listened devoutly to his proposals, which she accepted in the name of her young friend; but hinted a fear that the improvidence of Lord Bellingham had left her actually a beggar. Yet she congratulated him, that although there was a slur upon the birth of this charming girl, she was still derived from a noble stock; and educated as she had been, principally amidst persons of superior rank and refined society, she was not likely to disgrace his choice by grovelling sentiments or plebeian manners, but would carry to the station she was raised to, those ideas that peculiarly appertained to it.

Lord Glendarvon replied with a solemn mien, that this argument had certainly great weight with him; so much indeed, that it would have induced him to wave a much more important objection than the want of a trifling provision, which could not be to him of any estimation.

Every preliminary was therefore adjusted with extreme facility; for his Lordship

Lordship having delicately enquired if it would be necessary for him to apply to the Traherne family, Lady Melville informed him that it was upon the occasion of their having entirely abandoned the poor child, that she had taken her, from mingled affection and pity, into her protection.

"They are," she added, "so strangely averse to my sweet Laura, from the indignation they have conceived that she should claim any alliance with their high blood, that I actually fear they would oppose her advancement from mere antipathy. Fortunately however for her, the Marquis, at the request of her late mother, gave a sort of formal guardianship into the hands of a person I have some knowledge of, whose acquiescence I can easily obtain, and upon whose authority indeed, I feel myself empowered to act."

With this intelligence Lord Glendarvon was perfectly satisfied; and shortly after left the house, in the conviction that his good friend Lady Melville would open his cause to the fair Laura with more dexterity

than himself, and combat any scruple or reluctance with less embarrassment and more propriety.

Ere Laura had concluded the task assigned her, wholly unconscious of the near approach of the honour that awaited her concurrence, she was rejoined by her patroness, whose smiling air and exulting eye, as she desired her to seat herself by her side, claimed all her attention.

"My dear child," said Lady Melville, taking the hand of Laura, with much appearance of affection, "I bring you tidings it gives me sincere pleasure to be enabled to communicate. You have no longer any occasion to grieve when you consider yourself an abandoned alien of that haughty family who should have protected and cherished you: the loss of the provision which might have afforded you a respectable maintenance, you may *now* consider as of no object to you; and if the delicacy of your spirit has been wounded, when you found yourself compelled to trust solely to the hand of friendship for the support of your existence, let the

the regret cease, for your merits and your loveliness have procured you an establishment, such as I vainly hoped to attain for my younger daughters!"

At this prelude, the breast of Laura throbbed, the blood rushed in impetuous tides more than once to her cheek, and more than once receded as quickly, with the shock of wounded sensibility and mortified pride: and spite of the situation so officiously depicted to her, she would *thus* announced have even rejected him, whose image had unaccountably presented itself to her mind at the conclusion of Lady Melville's address.

"Perhaps," resumed her Ladyship, "your discernment, my dear Laura, enables you to anticipate my explanation: you must indeed have observed the attachment to which I allude, though your modest opinion of your attractions may have prevented you from properly judging of its extent."

Laura was still silent; but she perfectly comprehended of whom her insidious Ladyship meant to speak, and awaited in

terror the *fracas* that she believed inevitable, when her sentiments would be explicitly demanded. In the confusion of the moment the intelligence of Fanny Meedon did not immediately occur to her, that it was Lady Melville herself who had aided, at least, to reduce her to the dependance thus artfully placed before her eyes; and the weight of her pretended benefits, unalleviated by such a suspicion, pressed upon her imagination with a force that increased her reluctance to destroy by the avowal of her intentions, which yet must be made, the brilliant expectations her Ladyship had formed.

The Countess having paused for a reply, or for some indication by which she might guess at the turn her arguments or persuasions ought to take to have the most chance of becoming successful, at length resumed with a more serious aspect.

"You have now, Laura, an opportunity of demonstrating to the Traherne family, that without their protection or succour, you have found means of establishing

establishing yourself, better perhaps than if they had condescended to acknowledge your claims to their good offices. Mrs. Meedon's girls, who rejected you as an associate with such haughty insolence, may also repent their rancorous envy; and even Lady Mary, whose concealed opinions you must have penetrated, may possibly find herself constrained to treat you with respect, when you have attained that rank and eminence they all sigh for with ardour. You are young, and very lovely, and as the Countess of Glendarvon, will have very just pretensions to be as highly considered as almost any woman in the kingdom; with so much grace and beauty, it would have been cruel to have remained in obscurity, though indeed I could scarcely hope for so very desirable an alliance, certain things considered: and when my friendship prompted me to lay aside my own griefs, and forget my own embarrassed circumstances, for the effort in which I have so well succeeded, I could not have foreseen how soon my cares would be both relieved and rewarded."

During this harangue, Laura had in some degree collected her presence of mind; and her recollection of the intimation she had received, returned with this second hint of the obligations under which she laboured to so disinterested a patroness.

"I hope, I sincerely hope, Ma'am," returned she, "that they may be soon relieved and rewarded; but it cannot be in the manner your Ladyship expects. My utmost ambition at present extends to the wish of being protected by the family of Lord Bellingham, even if they refuse to acknowledge me but as a dependant on their voluntary bounty: and I would prefer almost any humiliation to that miserable one, of being rescued from poverty and obscurity by the caprice of such a man as Lord Glendarvon. I see that your Ladyship is offended at this confession of my sentiments, which unfortunately differ so much from your's: but in an affair so infinitely important to me, I am compelled to make it; and I must be the most mercenary of wretches after this avowal, to be induced by any circumstance however distressing,

distressing, to act in a manner that would disgrace it!"

"I confess, Miss Delaunie," exclaimed Lady Melville, "that you astonish me! Is it possible, young and inexperienced as you are, that you should thus endeavour to establish your silly prejudices as decisive opinions against the insinuated advice of your best friend? I will not advert harshly to the effects of my regard for you; but when I condescend to recommend any measure, however important, I think the recollection of them ought to have some little influence over your mind. In my house you have been, you still are considered as my daughter: in your late malady my incessant cares alone prolonged your existence; I watched over you in your insensibility—at noon I debarred myself from tasting a fresher air, which my unrelaxed attendance rendered so requisite, and at midnight I was still found by your side.—Yet this, it seems, you have forgotten——"

"No, Madam," interrupted Laura, whose heart reproached her with the

recollection that all she had represented was true, "I cannot forget this! And let me conjure your Ladyship not to efface the kindness that still impresses my memory, by urging me to destruction!—Yes, Lady Melville, I think only of an union with the man you propose, as the grave of happiness, peace, self-esteem, and every soothing consciousness of virtue and rectitude that now renders my situation tolerable to me!"

"You are at present much too heroic for further argument," said Lady Melville, rising with a sarcastic air, which did not however conceal the indignant emotions that possessed her; "and I shall leave you to reconsider what I have said. I must however hint to you, that if you reject my friendship, I am bound not to abandon you entirely; for I must only give you up to your surviving guardian, whose residence perhaps will be found rather more humiliating and still less eligible than mine!"

"My guardian, Madam!" repeated Laura, in extreme agitation.

"The

"The guardian appointed by your father," replied Lady Melville; "a fellow of abandoned principles, who is confined for debt or fraud either in the Fleet Prison or the King's Bench, I know not exactly which."

When she had pronounced this sentence, she quitted the room, leaving Laura in an agony of apprehension, and overwhelmed with doubt and terror. The threat of the Countess to deliver her up to the man she styled her guardian, she could not persuade herself to believe she would be so cruel to execute: but that she affected to have authority for doing so, argued that she might also pretend to claim a right of detaining her from any friend, who might feel sufficient compassion to endeavour to rescue her from her power; and the idea gave her inconceivable horror, as she had now imbibed an opinion so dreadful of the artifices of Lady Melville, that to remain under her dominion she believed to be certain destruction. The absence of Lord John and Mr. Aubrey appeared to seal her doom, as she could not suppose that

that Lady Betty Traherne would experience interest enough for a being she had never beheld, to oppose the usurped authority of the Countess, with that force and alertness that could alone save her from its apprehended effects. Still less could she hope that Mr. or Mrs. Hamilton, well inclined though they might be, would chuse to embroil themselves with such a woman: and besides, from what had dropped from Mr. Biranly, she believed them to be almost exclusively occupied in endeavouring to extricate Captain Rothemere from some unhappy adventure, into which his imprudence and folly had plunged him; whilst any delegate Lord John might still feel interested sufficiently to employ, if by accident her situation reached his knowledge, would not have either zeal or dexterity to snatch her from the grasp that might in the interim but too probably annihilate her.

The altered tone of Lady Melville, when Laura had made known her sentiments with a firmness she did not perhaps expect, had not escaped her notice; and she

she expected, when her determination of persevering in them should be discovered, to be exposed to her unqualified indignation: yet any open indication of this was less repugnant to her feelings, than the concealed machinations to which she had no means of opposition, and from which she had every thing to dread.

CHAP. III.

DURING the remainder of the day the manner of Lady Melville was calm, but distant and haughty; and Laura, occupied by a variety of projects to escape her, which she alternately rejected as impracticable, and reviewed as merely possible, was absent and wholly silent: and when she retired for the night, she was assailed by Dolly, who complained in energetic

energetic terms of the *doings* in the household of Lady Melville, who had ordered the gate at the lodge, and the other at the gardener's house to be kept locked, that none of her people, as she pretended, might be roaming about to the neighbouring alehouses, just as if she thought they was not up to clambering over.

"None of the women-sarvants," added Mrs. Maunder, "an't to be let out without her Ladyship's knowledge truly!—But I'll see if I an't to have my liberty better than that comes to. And indeed, Miss Laura," resumed she, in a crying tone, "if I'm treated so, I must give you warning; for it an't to be put up with.—I'm sure I'd do any thing to sarve you; but to be shut up like a thief, and not suffered to have my liberty, is what I niver was used to, and I won't bear it, let Lady Melville think what she will!"

"And would you indeed leave me here without one being in whom I could confide?" asked Laura, forgetting all caution in the apprehension.

"Not

"Not if I can help it, Ma'am, I'm sure," replied the *suivante*, wiping her eyes: "but when I came back from walking, they was all tittering at me, and fell to jeering, that I was fit to run mad!—'So you're caged, Mrs. Maunder!' says that impertinent fellow Wilson: 'well, you're a fine sleek bird for my Lady's Every, that I will say!'—So then they tittered again, and said, Ma'am, as how you was caged too; and when once her Ladyship got a hold, she was like a terrier, for she niver let go again! I'm sure I can't bear the thoughts of being mewed up after such a fashion: and if you don't like to speak to her Ladyship, Ma'am, why indeed I must, though I'd do any thing to sarve you, I'm sure."

"But, my poor Dolly," said her young Lady, "if you should be discharged——"

"Why, Ma'am, if you come to that," interrupted Mrs. Maunder, hastily, "who has a right to discharge me but you, I wonder? Sure she don't take it into her head that she's my mistress? If she do, I'm

I'm no sarvant of herne, I'd have her to know."

"If her Ladyship assumes the right," interrupted Laura, "I cannot oppose it with success; and who, can I be assured, will assist you?"

"Why then, Ma'am," cried Dolly, eagerly, "I would go back to my own country, and think I'd seen enough of your grand gentry and their ways, for the rest of my life!—all that I should be sorry for, would be going away, and leaving you, Miss Laura—and in such a mess too as you have got in, which I'm sure grieves me to the heart! But as for me—howsever, if Mrs. Hamilton's in London, I dare say——"

"Mrs. Hamilton!" repeated Laura, with a sudden thought:—"if indeed you are resolved to leave me, Dolly, and I believe I have no pretensions to exact at present the service of any one—if you should be discharged, will you take a letter for me to town? That would be serving me more than I can express!"

"Lauk,

"Lauk, that I will! and if you won't be affronted with me for going, Miss Laura, why I'll see and let her handy Ladyship know a bit of my mind—locking up folks so snug as she thinks! I'll let her know I an't a bird for her Every:—and hang me if I don't go and tell every body of my quaintance of her doings!—She thinks to run a fine rig with folks as an't no more gallows-slaves nor negers than she—a bit on't!"

Laura perceiving that the recapitulation of her injuries had occasioned the choler of Mrs. Maunder to mount very high, endeavoured to sooth her for the present: and having obtained a promise that she would preserve a guard upon her tongue until she saw her the next morning, she then dismissed her, that she might avail herself of the only certain opportunity that was likely to offer, of informing Mrs. Hamilton of the views of Lady Melville, and her menace of transferring her to the wretch she had depicted as her guardian, if she refused to accede to them; and to conjure her likewise to apply to Lady Betty Traherne

Traherne in her behalf. But as this lady might very justly feel offended that Laura had apparently neglected her permission, received through the medium of Mr. Aubrey, of attending her at her own house, she very reluctantly again detailed the accident that had occurred to prevent her from learning it in time to profit by an honour so unhoped-for.

"Captain Biranly can inform you," added Laura, "when I obtained my recovered letter—recovered, alas, too late!—and why it was so long detained from me; as he recollects, no doubt, the time of its delivery, for it was himself who restored it, he can corroborate if necessary, the cruel accident I have so much reason to lament, and perhaps procure for me the forgiveness of Lady Betty."

She was restrained by a motive of delicacy from betraying any knowledge of her near affinity to Mrs. Rothemere, lest it should be supposed that she urged it as a claim to the good offices of Mrs. Hamilton: neither indeed could she endure the idea of mentioning it from another reason,

which

which originated in her respect to the memory of her mother, and a wish of still acquiescing in the silence she had herself ever maintained.

She closed her letter therefore without adverting to the connection; and having laid it, already sealed, under her pillow when she reposed, she gave it into the hand of Dolly when she appeared the next morning, with an earnest adjuration to be careful of the trust. To Miss Meedon she had also written a few lines, expressive of the situation in which she found herself, which she delivered to Mrs. Maunder with the same caution.

"If," said Laura, "you are compelled to leave me immediately, present these letters yourself, if possible, to my friends: if you remain here to-day, return them to me, and perhaps I may find some other means. I have no doubt, if Lady Melville wishes you to quit your service, she will prevent me from again speaking to you before your departure: if you go then, Dolly, take this purse—Mrs. Hamilton may not be in town, and you may have occasion

occasion for what it contains; for I fear, indeed I have no reason to suppose that Lady Melville will be so liberal as I could wish: and when I consider your long attachment to me——"

"Lauk no, Ma'am," interrupted Dolly; "I can't think of such a thing, so good as you have been to me! and besides you may want the money——"

"Take it," said Laura, putting the purse into her hand: "I cannot endure that you should be exposed to want such a trifle, or that you should leave me without receiving some small mark of my friendship and good wishes!"

After some further objection, Mrs. Maunder at length complied with the commands of her young Lady, who urged them almost to anger: and finding that her absence would serve her most probably much more than her continued attendance could do, she now resolved to have a grand set-to with the old Dowager, and pay her sauce for all her misdemeanours towards her, both in town and country.

To

To secure the letters against the possibility of any accident, she instantly sat down, and making a linen bag for them, very deliberately undressed herself upon the spot, that Miss Laura might not be in any quandary about their safety, and sewed them in the inside of her stays.

This precaution did indeed disperse any fear her young Lady might have entertained of the vigilance of Lady Melville and her favourite, Mrs. Fisher; and she now wished that Dolly would have sufficient courage to execute her project of either obtaining the liberty of quitting the premises whenever she thought proper, or of procuring herself to be dismissed.

Nor was the accomplishment of this wish long delayed; for as she was yet at the breakfast table, at which Lady Melville had met her with an undisturbed mien, a clamour of contending voices reached even the apartment where they sat: and her Ladyship having listened a moment, stepped to the door; but immediately returned with an intention appa-

rently altered; and ringing, desired Mrs. Fisher might attend her.

Dolly, uncalled for, accompanied this good gentlewoman, and instantly appealed to the Countess against the impertinence of her favourite, in forbidding her a dish of tea to squinch her thirst.

"I an't been used to her wish-washes, and her cocoa," continued the complainant; "nor I won't put such stuff down my throat any longer to please nobody! And, my Lady, I must say, I think it an odd whim that I an't to put my nose out of the gates for a bit of air; and I must tell you, my Lady, flat and plain, as I don't chuse to be shut up like a Papish nunnery, not I! I an't brought out of a hospital for bad women like other some, nor I an't been used to herd with such; nor I won't be watched and locked up as if I was always running after fellows and doing nought——"

Lady Melville now looked impatient; and the obsequious Mrs. Fisher, with a low curtsy, began.

"My

"My Lady, this is nothing to what this obstropulous woman has been saying in my apartment! she has——"

"Well, and I'll have my say out!" interrupted Dolly, who had talked of her grievances till she was in a very proper fury; "fine goings on there must be in a house where a sarvant an't to be trusted out of doors for fear of telling somewhat of the doings!—and for that matter, I do believe they are better hushed up——"

Lady Melville, finding that Mrs. Maunder had no idea of suffering her to speak, had hastily applied to the bell; and Laura sat like a culprit, wishing the scene were past, and dreading lest the event might not succeed to her first expectation.

The butler and a footman now answered the summons of their Lady, who commanded them to remove poor Dolly to her proper situation, that she might no longer be insulted by her intemperate violence: and when this order was fulfilled amidst the kickings, cuffings, and apostrophes of Mrs. Maunder, her Ladyship desired her

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS LIBRARY

opponent, Mrs. Fisher, to discharge her immediately, and take care that she quitted the premises within half an hour.

This injunction renovated the sinking hopes of Laura, to whom Lady Melville turned when Mrs. Fisher had withdrawn, and made a slight apology for having exerted over the offender more authority than perhaps strictly appertained to her.

"But you heard the insolence of her invective," added the Countess, "and can therefore perceive the necessity by which I acted. Until you have procured another attendant, my woman shall assist you."

Laura prevailed over her feelings sufficiently to say that she was sorry Dolly had given her Ladyship so just a cause for dismissing her, and that she much regretted the improper language she had used.

"The people of my own household," resumed Lady Melville, "are necessarily reduced to a proper subordination: and were I to suffer the servant of any guest I

may have, to take those liberties I refuse to them, it could not be so easily preserved. But we will dismiss this subject, Laura, for one of much more importance to you. I flatter myself you have properly considered the proposals I mentioned yesterday: I have delayed resuming the discussion of them until this moment, to give you a fair and ample opportunity of weighing their advantages with any petty objections you may have conceived; and I now expect from your judgment and good sense such a decision, as your real friends can approve and sanction. Lord Glendarvon will be here this morning; and though he may perhaps be perfectly *au fait* of the caprices that sometimes govern a very young woman, who is conscious of the power of her attractions, yet he will, I suppose, expect such an answer as may encourage him to endure them, in the hope of a final assent."

"Such an answer, Madam," said Laura, gravely, "his Lordship cannot receive from me."

"Then, my simple child," resumed Lady Melville, "he must be content to receive it from me! I am too much your friend, Laura Delaunie, to allow you thus to cast away the unexpected advantages Fortune has placed in your reach; and from respect to the memory of your mother, I shall so far interest myself for her perverse orphan, as to place her out of the danger of that seduction which unprotected poverty incurs."

"How can your Ladyship," said Laura, her bosom swelling with indignant emotion, "have the heart to mention to me that unprotected poverty, which, had it not been for your own——"

She suddenly checked herself ere the sentence had wholly escaped her lips, from a recollection that she could only accuse, without a single argument to corroborate or prove so serious an assertion as that she was on the point of uttering; and Lady Melville regarding her earnestly for a moment, desired her to proceed.

"I entreat

" I entreat that you will favour me with the conclusion of your reproachful insinuation," added her Ladyship, " or I shall not be enabled to comprehend and reply to it; for it is really too mysterious to be readily understood."

Laura, repenting her unguarded sally, was silent and embarrassed; and Lady Melville continued.

" Miss Delaunie, I believe it will be proper that I explain my intentions with respect to the proposals of Lord Glendarvon: I will not mislead him; nor will I allow you to deceive yourself by an expectation that I shall suffer any romantic folly, which you may dignify by a fine name, to dash this very fortunate establishment from you. I shall candidly inform his Lordship that you are inclined at this moment to act the injured sentimentalist: but as I know you to be a young woman of excellent understanding, I am certain the farce will not be of long duration:—*en attendant*, I shall exhort your *adorateur* to patience; and as you must be conscious of your importance in

his eyes, I suppose you entirely expect that he will not be destitute of this convenient virtue."

"If he should possess it," replied Laura, whose cheeks glowed at the ironical mien of Lady Melville, "the character of Lord Glendarvon has been sufficiently discussed in my presence, to convince me that it would be a solitary virtue amidst many vices: and I cannot believe, when the friendship of your Ladyship induces you thus to urge me upon a subject so unpleasant, that this circumstance can have been perfectly recollected."

"Upon my word," exclaimed Lady Melville, with strong symptoms of anger in her eyes, "you have a most amazing fund of able argument! But, my pretty Laura Delaunie, whilst you thus allow yourself such very nice discrimination in selecting the happy mortal who is to be honoured with your hand, does it at all occur to you what you are, and how you are situated? Do you reflect, presumptuous girl! that you are wholly destitute of legal protectors, except your infamous

infamous guardian, and that you depend for existence upon the probity of a fraudulent bankrupt?"

"This is too much!" ejaculated Laura, bursting into tears. "Lady Melville, these harsh reproaches give me more to understand than I would willingly have believed from the testimony of others. I can mention one friend, though not a legal one, who will not shut her doors, I think, against me: to this friend deliver me up, and I shall not under her roof be subject to hear such cruel reflections upon misfortunes which ought to claim commiseration! I will not cast myself upon the probity of any one for the support of my existence; for I will make my talents subservient to my wants, and if my knowledge is circumscribed, my wishes shall be still more so!"

"Your talents," returned Lady Melville, "are very admirable, no doubt: but you may yet perhaps have to learn that the most brilliant talents generally acquire celebrity from patronage or fortuitous circumstances, rather than their own intrinsic

merit: inform me then under what powerful patronage or lucky incident are your's to blossom, and bear the desired fruit?"

"Surely, Madam," replied Laura, "the noble relatives of Lord Bellingham would not disdain to promote a plan which has at least industry and humility to recommend it."

Lady Melville shook her head.

"That you are little acquainted with the sentiments and general usages of the world," said she, "cannot be imputed to you as a fault; but if you were to be permitted to make trial of this very humble and industrious plan, you might be enabled to gain a considerable degree of experience! The family of Traherne would be the last beings in the kingdom to patronize your plebeian undertaking; for, as they now chuse to evade formally acknowledging you, because you are undistinguished by those sounding appellations they professedly venerate and bow to, they would rather repress than encourage you, lest they might inadvertently give the world

to

to suppose they tacitly assented to the alliance you claimed, and abetted even a half bred scion of their stock in degrading efforts to be useful to others. From their disclaiming tone and withdrawing hands, many people would be induced to form their conduct; and you would have full leisure, spite of your industrious plans, to rue your ill advised humility! But may I take the freedom of enquiring in what peculiar style you mean to make your *début?*

Laura, dispirited by her reasoning, as well as mortified by the air of derision that accompanied it, sighed, and remained silent.

"You have not perhaps made your decision," resumed her Ladyship: "let me assure you, however, that you will not very shortly be enabled to attempt this heroic and sentimental scheme, as I shall unfortunately oppose it: and I believe you will not find yourself so entirely exempted from my authority as you may have supposed."

Lady Melville now rung, and enquired if Mrs. Maunder had left the house: and having received an answer that she was then departing, she thought proper to detain Laura in her dressing-room upon some frivolous pretext, until she was well assured Dolly was at some distance from the place; and she then desired her to equip herself for a drive, as she would leave instructions for Lord Glendarvon to follow them if perchance he arrived during their airing.

Laura shuddered at the idea of meeting him, thus supported in his pretensions by the boasted authority of Lady Melville. On reaching her own apartment, she wholly forgot the purpose for which she had retired thither; and, reflecting with anguish and apprehension upon her open asser ions, and yet more dreaded insinuations, Laura would have yielded to despair, but that she hoped her own representations, joined to those of Dolly, might powerfully awaken the compassion of Mrs. Hamilton, and be the means of rescuing

rescuing her from a misery, of which she had hitherto only conceived a faint idea.

Her sentiments of Lady Melville now approached to detestation: whilst the cool circumspection of manner, and the determined tone in which her will and her intentions were uttered, inspired Laura with a cruel presentiment that she would find means to fulfil them. And independent of this terror, to be the perpetual companion of a being so inimical to her, and be compelled to an interchange of the civilities and courtesies custom prescribes, was now horrible to her feelings.

Lady Melville's woman interrupted the course of her painful ideas by offering her immediate services; and the conviction that Dolly was now on her way to London, gave Laura courage to rejoin her *soi-disant* patroness, who had been waiting for her some time, the attendant said.

This hint accelerated her motions; and having hastily made the requisite additions to her dress, she returned to the apartment where she had left Lady Melville,

Melville, and to her extreme surprise and mortification, beheld it occupied by Lord Glendarvon alone, who caught her hand as she was starting back, and telling her the Countess was writing a billet, insisted upon being favoured with her society in the interval.

Too much agitated to attend to what he said, Laura burst from him; and darting across the room, entered that where Lady Melville was composedly seated at her *secretaire*.

"What is the occasion of this?" demanded she, rather appalled by the pale and terrified aspect of Laura, who was entirely unable to reply: and as the eyes of the Countess required information of Lord Glendarvon, he declared he was in a predicament to advance the same question.

"What strange folly is this!" exclaimed her Ladyship, instantly comprehending the situation of Laura's mind: "recollect yourself, Miss Delaunie, and endeavour to repress these silly airs, or I shall be seriously displeased. I have," she added, "most unexpectedly letters to answer, and I must decline

decline accompanying you in the ride I proposed; but my Lord Glendarvon will perhaps occupy my seat, and drive you round the grounds."

"I will not give his Lordship that trouble," said Laura hastily: "as your Ladyship is not disposed to go out, I shall not quit the house."

"Will you allow me, however," resumed Lady Melville, "to conclude the letters, for which an express is now waiting? I will thank you, my Lord, to conduct Miss Delaunie to the library."

Laura, discomposed, chagrined, and irritated, gave him not time to comply with this intimation; but darting out of the room, flew up the stairs, and shutting herself in her own apartment, wept with vexation.

CHAP.

CHAP. IV.

IN little more than an hour, she had the satisfaction of observing the departure of Lord Glendarvon, for which she had earnestly watched; and her mind becoming more composed by the certainty of not being obliged to meet him again immediately, she had leisure to reflect upon the probable increase of Lady Melville's displeasure at the conduct to which she had been irresistibly impelled by aversion and indignant anger. Laura herself now condemned it as improper, and injurious to the display of that firmness and consistency, by which she could alone hope to discompose the calm artifices of the wily Countess: and she experienced upon this occasion

occasion the very wide difference between planning any peculiar mode of conduct in an hour of unruffled consideration, and being urged at the moment by the vehement impulse of strong emotions.

After another interval Lady Melville herself tapped at the door, which she desired her to open, and Laura tremblingly obeyed.

"Indeed you conduct yourself in a most unprecedented manner, Miss Delaunie!" said her undesired visitor. "Fisher informs me she has not been able to gain admission to you. I request that I may not hear more of this nonsensical locking-up business!"

She then motioned to her to leave the apartment; and Laura having complied in silence, Lady Melville led the way into the library.

"Your behaviour is so extremely childish and silly," said her Ladyship, when they were seated, "that I had almost resolved to exclude you from any knowledge of the trouble I am taking for your benefit: but in the expectation that my decisions

decisions respecting you will influence your's, I will communicate to you a letter I received this morning from your guardian, assenting to your residence with me for six months, and delegating to me a power of accepting or rejecting any overture of marriage that may be made to you—relying upon my friendship. I instantly replied to this letter by mentioning your engagement to Lord Glendarvon—" Laura started;—"and as the settlements," pursued Lady Melville, "in which I shall take care of your interests, will be soon expedited by my friend Mr. Wilmer, I advise you, Miss Delaunie, to prepare your mind for an immediate association with the honours to which you are destined."

At the name of Mr. Wilmer, Laura felt her blood curdle, and she was unable to reply.

Lady Melville was continuing after a pause, in which she beheld with secret triumph the consternation and confusion of her victim, when the door suddenly opened,

opened, and the Marchioness of Bellingham rushed in.

"Your servants, Madam," said she, with an assured air, "are either uncommonly insolent, or so rusticated, that they cannot reply properly to a very plain demand. I enquired till I was weary, if you were disengaged; and as I was not able to learn it of your people, I was compelled to this abrupt entrance."

"Laura, are you here, child?" she added, extending her hand, which Laura almost mechanically received: and as neither the deep *rouge* upon the cheek of Lady Bellingham, her very youthful dress, or her careless mien, could conceal the ravages of inquietude, regret, and bitter self-condemnation, Laura, forgetting the acrimony she had displayed at their last meeting, and remembering only her early kindness, burst into tears, and sobbed aloud.

The Marchioness, who was fast awaking from the long dream of dissipation in which her life had passed, was affected; but

but unwilling to betray a sensibility which remorse only had rekindled in her once ingenuous breast, she turned to her mother with an hysteric laugh, and asked if the girl had been taking lessons of sentiment from her.

Lady Melville threw up her eyes, and uttered a deep sigh.

"Upon my word, this is a very amusing pantomime!" pursued the intruder. "I am sorry to interrupt it; but as I must hurry back to town, I am compelled to advert immediately to the occasion of my coming. I am, Madam, as you may perhaps guess, in very embarrassed circumstances; and as, from your taking this elegant place, and enlarging your establishment, which I find you have done, I may naturally conclude you are quite in cash, I must beg you will reimburse me the remaining three hundred of the money you had of me when I pledged my jewels."

At this very explicit demand, the abruptness of which had been urged by the conduct of Lady Melville's servants,

and

and their Lady's exhibition of concern and horror at the appearance of the luckless Emily, Laura was struck with a mixed emotion of disgust and terror: that money thus disgracefully procured, should be thus shared, argued on the part of the Countess, general debasement as a woman, and peculiar depravity as a parent; and to the mind of Laura still further illustrated the character of a being whom she now almost considered as a fiend.

The aspect of Lady Melville evidently changed at the close of the sentence, and in a voice not wholly free from tremor, she desired Laura to withdraw; who, rejoicing to escape from a scene where her feelings were so cruelly wounded, bowed in silence to the Marchioness, and quitted the room.

Laura then found herself oppressed and almost suffocated by conflicting emotions; and hastening into the air to relieve her labouring respiration, sought a retired walk to indulge the tears that again burst from her eyes.

The

The path led by a short traverse to the river side; and as she had almost reached the extent of it, she was overtaken by a fellow in a shabby blue jacket, whose figure startled her.

The man, well interpreting her look of surprise and alarm, took off his hat, and informed her that he was the passage-boat-man, and had brought a trunk from the city for one of the gentlewomen. He then passed on; and Laura, observing him enter his boat, and push off, enquired with sudden eagerness whither he was going.

"Home, my Lady," replied the man.

"Where do you live?" demanded she.

"At Barnes, my Lady."

"You are not then going to London again?"

"Bless your Ladyship, no! I shan't go till tide serves to-morrow."

"And when will that be?" asked Laura.

The man informed her; and enquired if she had any parcel or errand for him.

"I believe,"

"I believe," said she, hesitating—"I think I shall have one."

"Then I'm to call here, my Lady?"

"No," she replied; "I am not certain of it: but if I send a letter or parcel by you, I shall be at these stairs myself when you say you go by."

The fellow, nodding significantly, told her in an altered tone, and with the appellation of Miss, that he took her meaning.

"But mayhap," added he, "I mayn't be here myself; for I believe I've got a job, to row some gentlefolks to Richmond in my wherry. But I suppose my lad and Tom will do as well; I'll order them not to land, but to keep a look-out for you, Miss."

"How shall I know them?" demanded Laura, with a perplexed air.

"God bless your soul! why you'll know the boat again, won't you? You may know the Charming Sue half a mile off:—here's my number, you see, and my name, John Bentley;—you can't be off spying that out."

Laura

Laura having assiduously remarked the appearance of the boat, assented; and the waterman made his farewell bows, leaving her agitated by a half-formed design of endeavouring to elude the usurped tyranny of the dreaded and abhorred Lady Melville.

To avoid any suspicion of having had an interview with Mr. John Bentley, Laura now returned to the house in a different direction, and was met in the hall by the Marchioness, who was passing to her carriage, which was so far from bearing any marks of her former splendour, that it was evidently a hired one, of a very second-rate appearance.

The countenance of Lady Bellingham was inflamed with anger and resentment; and not observing any attendant in waiting to let her out, her indignation broke forth.

"Laura," exclaimed she, in a voice faltering with contending passions, "if you remain in the house of this vile, unfeeling woman, you are undone! She has formed a plan to sell you to Lord Glendarvon

Glendarvon, after having, as I have lately heard, robbed you of your fortune! Me she has plundered of many thousands, and now refuses to acknowledge a poor paltry share of the debt, when my lavish folly has reduced me thus to sue for it!—at least, with her accustomed artifice, she endeavours to evade any payment until your sacrifice is consummated: and she has had the audacity to tell me she should then gain possession of your ten thousand pounds, relying upon my ignorance of her having long ago seized and dissipated it. But I have treated her promise and herself with the contempt they deserve, and the face of her injured daughter she shall never more behold!"

These last words were not uttered without tears of strong emotion; and Laura transfixed to the spot, saw her hastily quit the house, and fly to her chariot, without the power of articulating a syllable, or bidding her a long and last adieu.

She had not recovered from her stupor, when Mrs. Fisher ran into the hall, and looking round her with a mien of enquiry,

at length asked Laura if the Marchioness were gone.

"Yes, I believe so," replied she, endeavouring to conceal the confusion she was in.

"My Lady is afraid she is out of her mind," resumed Mrs. Fisher: "pray, Ma'am, did she speak to you?"

"To me!" repeated Laura, who instantly conceived that this question was dictated by Lady Melville: "yes, she said something—in a low voice——but I——she rushed forward with such quickness, that I was frightened!"

"I am quite sure she is beside herself," observed Mrs. Fisher: "you didn't hear what she said then, Ma'am?"

"No," replied Laura, who now found she must of necessity outrage the truth, or subject herself perhaps to confinement or observation. "The Marchioness spoke very indistinctly, and in a low tone; but her manner alarmed me greatly:—I fear indeed she is deranged!"

"That's very certain," said Mrs. Fisher, with great alacrity: "indeed she has

has almost killed my poor Lady!—Won't you go to my Lady, and comfort her, Ma'am? for her Ladyship is crying sadly!"

"I am too much shocked myself," replied Laura, "to afford Lady Melville any consolation: I must endeavour to recover my composure before I approach her Ladyship, or my inquietude will only irritate her griefs."

She then passed on, and with trembling steps gained her apartment, where she instantly revolved her previous plan of flying from the treachery, which the unhappy Marchioness had so strongly corroborated. The horror and aversion of Laura were now at their height; and she recollected many instances that happened under her observation, when a child, to confirm the assertion of Lady Bellingham, that she had been plundered by her mother.

"What then am I to expect from her hands!" exclaimed Laura: "Oh God! let me fly, let me quit her guilty dwelling, and deplore with tears of bitter repentance, that I was induced by any neces-

sity to become her wretched and despised inmate!"

The method of her escape now occupied her thoughts; she feared lest Lady Melville might unfortunately detain her in the house at the very moment the boat might pass: but even if this should happen, she resolved to venture into any other that might present itself, and would receive her, or wander on foot to London, rather than remain in the power of so detestable a woman.

For the first time it now occurred to her that she had parted with all her money to Dolly: and this recollection struck her with anguish and despair, as she could not even pay the boatman for conveying her to town. But after much painful reflection upon this unlucky circumstance, she at length determined that it should not prevent the effort she meant to make, since the man, in consideration of his knowledge of the household from whence he took her, might be induced to credit any excuse she might form, to defer the payment of his fare.

Laura

Laura now sought for the plainest and least distinguishable garments she possessed, which, with a large bonnet that generally sheltered her from the sun, she laid apart to wear the next day; and then sat with all the calmness she could obtain, to consider if there were any other precaution she ought to take, to give herself the best chance of escaping detection.

The report of Mrs. Fisher had satisfied her Lady; who not being then anxious to examine Laura herself upon the subject that had alarmed her, sent her a message by her woman, importing that she must not await her at the dinner table, as Lady Melville was too much affected at what had happened, to appear until she had composed herself for some hours.

In fact the conscience of her Ladyship, alarmed by the situation and reproaches of her daughter, would not immediately permit her to meet without considerable remorse, the victim whose almost inevitable misery she was now planning, urged on by the base and unjust gratification of an ambition to live in a style which she

believed to enchain the respect and consideration of the world, by a busy and intriguing spirit that goaded her to action, and a vicious pride, that would not allow her patiently to sink into passive unimportance!—These were the sources of all her chicanery, injustice, and inhumanity—the ruin of the once innocent and amiable Lady Emily Melville, the aggravated misery of Mrs. Rothemere, and the intended sacrifice of her hapless daughter!

Very much to the satisfaction of Laura, she beheld her not through the day, which she passed with as much composure and as little impatience as possible, in her own dressing-room.

In the evening her intended evasion was rendered more practicable and assured to her imagination, because she accidentally found behind the mirror upon her toilet, two shillings and some halfpence wrapped in paper, which she recollected to be the change out of a little commission, executed for her by one of the servants.

This

This unexpected resource, slender as it was, gave her confidence; and through the whole night she thought with alternate exultation and fear, that on the next most probably she should not lay her head under the abhorred roof of Lady Melville.

When her borrowed attendant tapped at her door in the morning, the trembling eagerness of Laura had precluded the necessity of her assistance, for she was already dressed: and shortly after the woman brought a request from Lady Melville, that she would take her breakfast without her; and the intimation was gladly obeyed.

When the solitary repast was ended, to which Laura was too much agitated to do honour, her wishes yet more ardently urged forward the stealing foot of Time; but she had even now some hours to wait for that important one appointed by the boatman: and as the moments passed heavily on, and listless apprehension succeeded in rotation to the liveliness of hope, which is generally supported by action, and

relaxed by supineness, Laura felt the misery of anxious suspense in its full force, because she was not compelled to dissipate it by employment; and any voluntary exertion of her mind, except upon the single point that engrossed it, she found impossible.

Already had she passed in review more than once, the many accidents that might prevent the accomplishment of her plan, and others still more to be dreaded, which might return her, after a partial success, into the power of Lady Melville, from whom she could not then have any mercy to expect; and her courage and resolution were fast sinking into a despondency that urged her not to pursue an intention, now appearing to her timid imagination too hardy and difficult of execution, when the sight of Mr. Wilmer advancing towards the house, revived with all their energy her horrors and antipathy, and with them her resolution to depart at every event.

As she traversed her apartment, awaiting with renovated ardour the moment of her escape, she suddenly recollected the friendly

letter

letter of Fanny Meedon, and started at the idea of leaving it behind her; as she had now little faith in the security of a lock against the curiosity and indignation of Lady Melville, when she should discover her escape.

This fortunate remembrance procured her employment for some time; for she looked over and arranged her escritoir, placing those papers she wished to preserve, about her person: amongst these were the letters of her mother to Lady Melville, and that of Miss Meedon with the well-recollected lines on the cover, the writer of which she ardently wished to ascertain; for though their import seemed to declare that they were dictated by St. Orme, he had, if so, employed another hand to trace them.

At length the time mentioned by John Bentley, whose name Laura had often unconsciously repeated to herself, approached, and Mr. Wilmer had not departed. She had not received any summons from Lady Melville; and hoping they were deeply engaged in their nefarious schemes and

consultations, she stole into the shrubbery with her bonnet drawn over her face, and wrapped up as much as possible in a manner to conceal her figure. She had observed that Lady Melville affected to accoutre herself in the same style when she took her matinal walks; and she hoped therefore, that she should herself appear the less remarkable to her people, should they perchance perceive her: and had she encountered any one, to whom she would have thought it prudent to account for her unusual mode of dress, she meant to have complained of a cold and headach. Laura reached the river side however by the same path she had taken the preceding day, without meeting a single being, and eagerly glancing her eyes around, beheld several boats, but upon a more accurate survey, not the particular one she sought.

CHAP. V.

THE tide flowed towards London, and that had been one of the signals of the waterman for expecting him.

"I am too late!" sighed Laura; "I should have ventured hither sooner!"

At length, however, after some moments of extreme inquietude and disappointment, round a winding of the river appeared a patched and dirty sail; and in a few succeeding minutes she recognised the Charming Sue, on board which were two lads, to whom she beckoned.

They steered instantly for the steps on which she stood; and Laura in gaining the boat, very nearly fell into the river, from eagerness and trepidation.

"Arn't we to wait for a parcel?" asked one of the youths.

"No, no," returned Laura, almost breathless; "I am going myself."

"We arn't to stop for any thing more then?"

"Oh no, no!—pray go, I am in haste!"

They very deliberately obeyed; and Laura now for the first time perceived that she had for a fellow-voyager, a very clean and decent young woman, who had civilly given up the most convenient seat, and endeavoured very respectfully to accommodate her: but she was too much agitated to thank the girl immediately, and could only watch the receding view of the place she had quitted in an agony of perturbation, scarcely yet mingled with any degree of joy. But when the grounds and the most distant prospect of the hated mansion had entirely disappeared, Laura began to breathe in freedom, and to turn her thoughts towards the most easy method of reaching the house of Mrs. Hamilton; though even there she feared Lady Melville

Melville with her pretended authority might follow her.

After much consideration, she believed it would be more safe to hide herself from her immediate pursuit at the humble and unknown dwelling of Mrs. Forster, the faithful servant of her mother, whose address she had in her reserved papers, from which she now took it, and placed it singly and carefully by itself, again to resort to if necessary.

She had then leisure to observe her female companion, whose countenance pleased her; and after some hesitation, she enquired where she quitted the boat.

"At Chelsea, Ma'am," said the young woman.

"Chelsea!" repeated Laura, with marks of disappointment in her countenance: "that is before we reach London?"

"Yes, Ma'am," replied the girl; "but I'm going to London, only I shall call at my sister's at Pimlico, and then go right across the Park into Piccadilly."

Laura felt greatly reassured by this intelligence,

intelligence, and secretly resolved to obtain, if possible, the permission of the young woman to accompany her; but she had not at that moment sufficient confidence to make the proposal.

The boat appeared to her to move very slowly; and every place they approached, she eagerly enquired if that were Chelsea. At length, however, when her patience and her spirits were nearly exhausted, they approached some steps, and the young woman prepared to land. Laura then, assailed by the apprehension of being left only with the two lads, hastily declared that she would likewise quit the boat.

Having paid what was demanded for her passage, she told the girl she wished to go into Piccadilly; but as she was unacquainted with the way, entreated that she might be allowed to walk with her.

To this proposition the young woman, after a momentary hesitation, assented; and then putting on her pattens, and taking a large bundle under one arm, and holding something tied up in a coarse blue checked handkerchief in the other,

she

she set forward with hasty strides, observing that she was afeard there was going for to be a shower.

"It an't very clean under foot now," added she: "and I can't help thinking, Ma'am, your feet will soon be wet through with those thin shoes, without pattens nor nothing."

Laura cared little, however, for the apprehended shower, or the dampness of the ground, provided she could hasten forward; and this she intimated to her companion, the creaking of whose leather stays, and the clinking of whose pattens, were musical sounds to her ear.

As they advanced, she again looked at the address of Mrs. Forster, and asked the girl if John-Street, Oxford Road, were near Piccadilly.

"Lord bless me, no, Ma'am!" replied she: "it's ever such a way off; and I'm sure you don't look as if you could walk so far."

"Oh yes, I can," cried Laura, eagerly: "but are you not proceeding further than into Piccadilly?"

"I'm

"I'm going to place," returned the young woman, "in Charles Street, Berkeley Square, to a lady who has hired me as kitchen-maid: so if you please, Ma'am, you can walk with me to there, and then any child may find their way into Oxford Street—but it's a long cut for all that!"

This declaration rather alarmed Laura, who felt such assurance in the protection the society of this girl seemed to afford her, that she dreaded to part with her: and to complete her inquietude, she began to feel the awkwardness of introducing herself thus abruptly to Mrs. Forster, and claiming an asylum in her house, when it might be inconvenient to herself, and displeasing to her husband, of whose temper and disposition she knew nothing.

Under the impression of this anxiety, she considered whether it would not be better to venture to the house of Mrs. Hamilton; but the fear of not finding either herself or Mr. Hamilton at home, and in their absence, of being seized and reclaimed by Lady Melville, who would, she

she believed, immediately seek her there, deterred her: besides, that the distance between Berkeley Square and the habitation of her friends, appeared to her recollection immense; and to John Street, therefore, she resolved to bend her steps.

Laura and her companion had now reached a neat row of houses on a sort of terrace, at one of which the young woman stopped; and being embarrassed how to ring the bell whilst holding her bundles, Laura took charge of the checked handkerchief and its contents.

The summons to attend the door, was answered by a dirty-looking servant girl, who hailed the other with the exclamation of—"Lord, Bet, why I didn't think to see you till Friday!"

"I'm sent for in a hurry," replied Bet: then observing that her sister regarded Laura with curiosity—"This young gentlewoman," she added, "comed in the boat with me; and as she doesn't know her way rightly, she's walked with me.—Miss, I'm sure I beg your pardon—I didn't think of the handkerchief!"

And

And she offered to resume it; but Laura, whose conscience had smitten her for some time past, for receiving so considerable a benefit from this girl, without attempting to relieve her of a small part of her load, would not allow her: and with many acknowledgments, after a long gossip with her sister, Bet again set forward, very much pleased that she could now shift her more unwieldy bundle from one arm to the other.

They had scarcely entered the Park however, before the wind rose in sudden gusts; and a heavy shower descending in an oblique direction, pelted them severely in the face. Laura was in five minutes wet through her clothes; and the storm increasing, still more incommoded and terrified her; for the violence of the wind almost raised her from the earth, and it was only by repeated struggles she could recover her breath: her shoes were so completely soaked, that they either clung miserably to her chilled feet, or appeared to be slipping from them.

"Goodness gracious!" exclaimed the young

young woman, "I wish you had a pair of pattens, or clogs, or something; it makes a body shiver to hear you pat-patting in those tiny slippers, Miss!——Lauk a mighty!" she resumed, "you'll catch your death, I do think!—why here's my thick cloak almost wet through!"

Laura made no reply: indeed she was not quite able to make herself heard in the din of the storm; and after a fruitless effort, was content to remain silent.

At length she found herself in Piccadilly, and the rain had almost ceased; but she was cold, dispirited, draggled, and forlorn; and had she seen a hackney-coach, would have entered it, even though she believed she had not money sufficient to discharge it. She reflected too with horror, that she must now soon part with her associate, and pursue her way alone, and she shuddered at the idea: whilst Betty, observing that her companion was very much gazed at, and her dirty lamentable appearance, and blue checked handkerchief commented upon, began to be alarmed about her character, and the conclusions

conclusions that might be drawn, were she to be seen with her.

Resuming her bundle therefore, which Laura was not sorry to relinquish, Mrs. Betty made the best of her way up Half-moon-Street, leaving her to follow as expeditiously as she could; and ere Laura was aware of her having reached her place of destination, the girl wishing her a good afternoon, pushed open an iron door in a palisade, and tripped nimbly down the area-stairs.

Her sudden disappearance was like a thunderbolt to the unfortunate Laura, who, having stood for a few seconds entirely motionless, and finding herself an object of laughter to some footmen who were standing round the door of a neighbouring house, at length passed hastily on she knew not whither, and very soon perceived that she was in Berkeley-Square.

The sun now again emerged from the breaking clouds, and the streets beginning to be dry, rendered her splashed and draggled garments the more remarkable: yet still she beheld not either hackney-coach

or

or chair, to shelter herself from observation. Her distress increased every moment, and ere she left the Square, she had resolved to draw her bonnet completely over her face, and call at the house of Mrs. Meedon, which was not a hundred paces from it, and wait in the hall until Fanny was called out to her: her heart palpitated violently at the idea of being perhaps discovered by some one of the household, but she could no longer support her own apprehensions, and the impertinent gaze of every one that passed her.

To her extreme mortification, there was a carriage at the door of her late habitation, which was open, and garnished as usual with half a dozen very idle and proportionably insolent lackeys, who sturdily kept their ground, though they saw that she wished to pass.

Laura, frightened and abashed at the steady and sneering impertinence of their regards, raised the knocker, which she suffered to fall in a single tap; and at this signal of her humble situation, one of the fellows demanded of her, by the appellation of his draggled dear, whom she wanted

wanted to speak to, and what was her business.

Shocked at the insults to which she now felt herself liable, Laura hastily pushed by him, and entered the hall: but no one thought proper to answer so modest a summons to the door; and in an agony of perturbation, she awaited the appearance of James, the boy, by whom she hoped to gain the notice of Miss Meedon, without being discerned or recognised by any of the family.

Almost five minutes had elapsed, appearing to Laura five hours, and still no servant belonging to the house approached; she would have knocked, or rung the gate bell, but the dread of encountering the insolence of the footmen round the entry, deterred her; when one of them advancing towards her, informed her with a corroborating oath, that he had betted a crown she was handsome.

"So hold back your d—mn—d bonnet," added he, "and let's see if I'm not on the right side of the post."

At this address Laura would have flown

up the stairs to avoid the apprehended insult, had she not beheld the younger Embleton descending them, who caught a view of her face as in her perturbation she raised it, in the almost unconscious hope that the step she heard was that of her friend.

"Good God! Miss Delaunie!" exclaimed the astonished Matilda. Then turning suddenly back, and hastening towards the dressing-room of her sister, "Here is Miss Delaunie!" resumed she, "such an object!—I really believe she is come on a begging plan!"

On hearing this apostrophe, which in fact was rather meant for the ear of Laura than that of Miss Embleton, regardless of impediments or consequences, she rushed into the street, and walking without any other reflection than the wish of escaping the further inspection of the society, from which she was conscious poor Fanny could not have protected her, she found herself in two minutes in a street, which from the appearance of it, she feared was Bond Street. To ascertain this conjecture,

ture, she looked up at a turning for the name, when a gentleman who was crossing, gazed earnestly at her, and suddenly stopped.

Laura had not observed his countenance; but in extreme confusion walked forward, without passing either to the right or left. She was now faint and weary, her bosom throbbed with agony, and her head was giddy and painful; and when she believed herself entirely past the observation of the person who had so suspiciously regarded her, she began to consider that it was impossible she should reach the desired place of refuge, unless she enquired the way to it: but to address herself to a passing stranger, was a task her timidity prevented her from accomplishing for some time: yet at length the street in which she was, terminated by another in a transverse direction, and she was compelled to do this, or take the chance of wandering exactly contrary to the way she wished to go.

The idea was terrible to her, for it was between five and six o'clock, the hemisphere

sphere was again darkened by heavy clouds; she still beheld not a single hack unoccupied, and knew not how far she might yet have to walk, whilst her limbs already trembled with fatigue, cold, and inquietude. At this moment she was encouraged to make the necessary enquiry, by the good-humoured countenance of a fat woman, who was standing at her shop-door: and from her Laura heard with delight that the place before her was Oxford Street, and if she crossed over and turned to her right, she could not avoid seeing John Street.

With revived alacrity she followed these instructions; but her satisfaction was rather abated on discovering that she was followed by the gentleman she had remarked in Bond Street, whose figure she caught a glimpse of, in turning rather suddenly.

Her timidity was now again alarmed, and only the near prospect of a friendly haven supported her unassured steps: with transport, such as she scarcely yet had ever known, she at length beheld at a

turning the inscription she sought; but her attendant was now almost immediately by her side. Laura thought he was meditating to accost her; she hastened her pace, and he likewise quickened his: shocked and terrified, she cast her eyes with wild eagerness, now on this side, now on the opposite one, for the name of Forster, and at length it met her sight over the door of a small shop. Laura exerted her remaining strength to push it open, and entering the place in breathless disorder, staggered a few paces, and fell.

A woman, who was working behind the counter, started up with an exclamation of—"What's the matter?" and observing the miserable plight of the intruder, and that she was apparently pursued by a fashionable looking young man, she called loudly upon her husband to come down stairs; whilst the culprit, by whom her compassionate indignation had been awakened, without attending to her outcries, seized the senseless Laura, and pushing the bonnet from her face, it slipped entirely from her head; and the good

good woman beholding her inanimate features, uttered a loud shriek, and snatching her from the arms of her supporter—

"Get out of my way!—get out of my house!" she ejaculated in a tempest of rage, "or I shall do you some mischief."

"Do you then know this young lady?" asked the offender.

"Know her, dear creature!" repeated Mrs. Forster in a softened accent; then suddenly raising her voice to a pitch little short of screaming—"Get out of my house," she added, "you barbarous villain, or I shall certainly murder you!"

Mr. Forster now rushing into the shop, demanded the occasion of her anger and distress.

"Look here, John," she continued; "here's my Miss Delaunie killed between 'em all!"

Whilst John, who was not quite so much interested in the event, was very naturally enquiring how she came there, the young man silently retreated; and pushing his way through a mob that was

gathering at the door, very rapidly disappeared.

" I don't care how she came here, nor I don't know," returned the wife, carrying Laura into a little back room; " but here she is; and I should have known her for my poor mistress's daughter all the world over.—Kitty, Kitty, I say, are you asleep? Why don't you run for a doctor?—Lord help me! why don't you get some water, John?—She looks as like my poor lady, when that misfortune befel ——Oh Christ! she is all damp and wet! Kitty, Kitty, come back, and make up the fire!"

Mr. Forster, foreseeing that no attendance could now be paid to the shop, wisely locked the door; and then assisted the servant girl with so much diligence to execute the hurried commands of his wife, that in less than half an hour Laura was put into a warm bed, and had drank some kind of posset, prepared by the anxious Mrs. Forster, who beheld her returning sense with mingled apprehension and delight.

Laura

Laura was wholly passive in her hands; and having made a successful effort to thank her, found herself too much exhausted to say any thing further, and soon sunk, by the force of the potion, into a profound sleep.

CHAP. VI.

WHEN she awoke, every thing around her was dark and silent; and starting up in great confusion of mind, she exclaimed—

"Where am I?"

"Safe out of the clutches of that wicked old Lady Melville!" replied the voice of Mrs. Forster. "I will go and fetch a candle, my dear young Lady, and give you the draught which the doctor ordered you."

"What doctor?" demanded Laura, in surprise.

"The doctor sent by the young gentleman I rated so in my fright," replied the good woman. "And, my dear Miss Laura," resumed she, returning with a light, "Mrs. Aubrey has been here to see you; and——"

"Mrs. Aubrey!" repeated the patient eagerly; "Oh why did you not awaken me?—Mrs. Aubrey in London!"

"She has been in London almost a week; and very uneasy about you, my dear young Lady. And that good old gentleman, Lord John, is coming back, and his sister and him will take care of you;—so you'll never be badly off again, thank God!"

All this intelligence was so very consolatory to Laura, that it was even more efficacious than the prescription or the posset; and having enjoyed for some time the cheering prospect of future peace and happiness, she sunk again into forgetfulness, without perceiving that her mother's faithful

faithful Nancy was silently and immoveably fixed at her bedside.

In the morning, however, Laura found her there; but without any suspicion that it had been her station almost through the night.

On expressing a desire to rise, and assuring this good woman that she was very well, notwithstanding a hoarseness which Mrs. Forster had observed with alarm, her own garments were brought to her, which the careful creature had procured to be washed in the night; and Kitty had been already dispatched to a neighbouring shop for a pair of shoes, for which, those that Laura had worn the preceding day, now stiff with half-dried mud, were the pattern.

All these attentions brought the tears into her eyes; and now recollecting both the person, and the former kindness and fondness of Mrs. Forster when she was a child, Laura threw her arms round her neck, and wept upon her bosom.

The good woman sobbed too.

" Ah, my Miss Laura!" exclaimed she, " that the dear lady, your mamma, could but have lived——"

Then suddenly checking herself, she spoke of Mrs. Hamilton, and adverted to the pleasure she would experience to find her safe out of the power of the wicked Countess.

" I don't ask you how you got here, my Miss Laura," continued Mrs. Forster; " for I can't bear to think of the state you was in, nor of what you must have gone through; but I hope it was not very bad!"

Laura cursorily related her voyage, and the little journey that succeeded it; and as it had ended so fortunately, Mrs. Forster heard it without much distress, though she execrated the wickedness of Lady Melville in driving her to such extremity.

A tap at the chamber-door interrupted her invective, and it was followed by the entrance of Fanny Meedon; who, having received and returned the affectionate embrace

embrace of Laura, told her that she was relieved from a dreadful anxiety by finding her thus well and in good spirits.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," added Miss Meedon; "for I merely called upon Mrs. Forster to consult with her upon intelligence I received yesterday as I sat at table, which terrified and perplexed me. The ladies at my mother's amused themselves, during the dinner and in the evening, with commenting upon your pretended appearance in our hall, in rags and dirt; and they asserted that you gazed wildly at all the servants without speaking; and at length, on catching a view of Matilda Embleton, you entreated she would relieve your distresses. I could not certainly credit any part of this, but I thought you might probably have been seen somewhere; and those unfeeling and mischievous young women succeeded in rendering me very miserable."

Laura having acknowledged, with earnest gratitude, the interest Miss Meedon took in her welfare, informed her of the foundation of this tale, such as it had

reached her ear; and the good-natured Fanny regretted that she had not been apprized of her real situation in time to succour her.

Mrs. Forster pressed her to breakfast with her guest; but Miss Meedon told Laura that at this moment her motions were watched, in the hope of discovering her retreat; and she wished to return home before her absence could be remarked by the attendants of the Embletons, to whose idleness she had so far trusted. Unwillingly, therefore, Laura was compelled to allow of her immediate departure, but with a promise of hearing from, or seeing her the next day.

She had scarcely ended her breakfast, which it required all her rhetoric to induce Mrs. Forster to partake, when another visitor, still more desired, was introduced; and Laura had the happiness of finding the amiable Mrs. Aubrey her warm and compassionating friend. As Miss Meedon had suspected, the first letters Laura had written never reached her; but at such a crisis she would not suffer her

her regret to supersede her more welcome emotions, and the subject was only slightly mentioned.

After the first effusion of her joy was past, Mrs. Aubrey informed her that Lady Betty Traherne was very much indisposed, and had caught her malady through the violence of a shock she had received, by seeing and recognising her in a public shop, to which she had been conveyed in a fainting fit.

"Her Ladyship regrets," added Mrs. Aubrey, "that she did not instantly rescue you from the unworthy Lady Melville; but her surprise and confusion deprived her of all presence of mind: for though her Ladyship was displeased with you, my dear young friend, for neglecting, as she had reason to suppose, to comply with her wish of receiving a visit from you on your journey to town, yet the sight of you, and your extreme resemblance to a lady she was much attached to, obliterated her anger ere she heard your exculpation; and you are now, I

 believe,

believe, her first object. At my request, she has permitted you to be my guest, until she is sufficiently recovered to behold you again without endangering her health a second time; and I come this morning with an intention of claiming you, if you are not averse to confirm the favour Lady Betty has granted me."

"Ah Madam!" returned Laura, "how can I in any manner thank you as I wish, for every instance of kindness I have received from you!—I shall accompany you with more pleasure than I have tasted since I was so hastily snatched from Adwan.——But I must not forget, in my recovered happiness, to enquire for the Marquis of Bellingham: is he in health, Madam, and—and has Lord John reason to be satisfied?"

"The Marquis is very well, I believe," replied Mrs. Aubrey, "and Lord John, attended by my good man, is on his return to England:—of any thing further I cannot inform you."

Laura now extended her enquiries to the

the children and Miss St. Orme; and learned that Caroline was still under the protection of their mutual friend.

"She ardently wishes to see you," added Mrs. Aubrey, "and could scarcely be prevented from following me here; but I feared your spirits might not yet be sufficiently composed to receive more than one visitor at a time, and I left injunctions that she should be detained in strict confinement till my return. We will now, if you please, relieve the poor Caroline; for indeed she has been very uneasy from the moment the terrible account reached us yesterday, of your exhausted and alarming situation."

Laura wished to enquire by whom this account was transmitted, but a painful consciousness withheld her; and Mrs. Aubrey, without giving her further information, now called the good woman of the house, that her young guest might bid her adieu."

"Good-bye, my dear Miss Laura," said Mrs. Forster: "I'm very sorry to part with you; but I could not expect you would

would be suffered to stay long in such a poor place as this. I shall comfort myself with thinking of the good friends you have got;—and to-morrow morning, please God, and Mrs. Aubrey will be so kind as to give me leave, I will call and see how you do."

Laura replied with equal symptoms of regard, joined to the gratitude which the attentions and services of Mrs. Forster had excited; and the requested permission having been very readily given, Mrs. Aubrey conducted her to a carriage that was attending, and the good woman followed it with an earnest regard, till it was no longer to be discerned.

Laura now recollected to enquire if Mrs. Aubrey could inform her whether Dolly had made her appearance at the house of Mrs. Hamilton; and had the satisfaction of hearing that she had reached it the preceding day, and that Mrs. Hamilton had transmitted her letter immediately to Lady Betty, who was alarmed at the persevering and resolute wickedness of Lady Melville, and earnestly wished

wished for the prompt return of her brother, that something decisive might be done.

"Indeed she has, I find," added Mrs. Aubrey, "been uncommonly agitated by your situation; for, notwithstanding her indisposition, she returned to town the day after she had encountered you, and attempted to see you at the house of the Dowager Countess; but either you were denied to her, or you had really left London. But now all our inquietudes are I hope at an end: and I am charmed that you have had the spirit and good fortune to extricate yourself; for though Lady Melville might have refused to have given you up, yet I am assured she will not have the audacity to reclaim you by violence."

Mrs. Aubrey then let down the glass, and looking up towards the windows of a house at which the carriage stopped—

"There is Caroline and another of your friends watching my return," said she, with a smile; "have the charity, my fair Laura, to lean forward and shew yourself,

yourself, to shorten the pangs of suspense."

Laura obeyed this intimation; and catching a momentary view of St. Orme as he hastily quitted a window, every object appeared in a moment to be dancing before her eyes; and when he offered his assistance at the carriage-door, she seemed unconscious that she was expected to quit it.

On beholding Caroline on the steps of the house, anxiously waiting her entrance into it, she burst into tears, and stretched her arms towards her, yet made no effort to remove.

"Carry her in, my good Cecil," said Mrs. Aubrey; "her spirits are agitated, and she is still weak."

He immediately complied; and the earnest enquiries of Miss St. Orme, as she led her up the stairs, restored her recollection.

"It is the effect of joy," replied Laura, "to find myself once more in the kind protection of a friend, and to discover that I am not disclaimed!"

"Disclaimed!"

"Disclaimed!" repeated Miss St. Orme; "good Heaven! why should you suppose it?—Who, my dear Laura, would be so cruel and unjust?—But you do not recognise Cecil, who has been equally anxious with myself for your arrival: he brought us the good news of your tranquil night, almost before our own levee this morning."

Laura made him a short acknowledgment; and then turning to Mrs. Aubrey, enquired if her children were in town.

They were not, the amiable mother replied: she had left them to the care of a relation in her absence, and in full confidence of the attention and attachment of their *gouvernante*, honest Martha.

"But I have a love-letter for you from Frederic," continued Mrs. Aubrey, "and numberless kisses from them all three: they were indeed rather disturbed when they discovered that we had not heard from you, as your promise had led us to expect; but your little champion said he was sure you could not help it."

"Indeed he did me justice!" returned Laura, the tears starting to her eyes.

"He

" He not only deserves credit for his affiance," observed St. Orme, " but he will have the satisfaction of expecting and claiming when he next sees you, such a reception as will gratify and reward his attachment."

Laura blushed at the allusion, but replied not: and Mrs. Aubrey, resuming the conversation, informed her that her friends, the Hamiltons, were almost perpetually engaged with Mr. Rothemere, who had lodgings a short distance from town, for the recovery of his health, which was yet very unsettled; and it was only the perpetual presence of the one or the other, that preserved him from the fatal effects of his repeated imprudences.

This explanation relieved Laura from any inquietude she might otherwise have perhaps experienced at the apparent neglect of her early friend; who, in the midst of her own embarrassments, had evinced, she said, a very flattering attention to her welfare, by the early communication of her letter to Lady Betty.

" But with all this acknowledgment to one

one person for an intended service," said Caroline, smiling, "I confess I think you rather deficient in gratitude to another, who has been still more recently very active in his endeavours to assemble all your friends round you, and send you consolation: I speak of the knight-errant who traced you to the house of Mrs. Forster, and had nearly been strangled for his good intentions. But you do not appear sensible of his anxiety for your safety, or the hazard he incurred of being torn to pieces for venturing to act from its impulse!"

"I should be very much concerned," replied Laura gravely, "that you should seriously charge me with ingratitude; but I really do not know of whom you speak."

"Oh fie!" exclaimed Miss Orme, laughing: "I could not have believed this!—can you say you are unacquainted with the gentle youth who followed you yesterday to the house of Mrs. Forster?"

"Indeed I can with truth say it," returned she, in some distress; for she now was almost confirmed in the idea that it

was

was Cecil himself: "at the moment," added Laura, "I was impressed with the apprehension that I was pursued either by a stranger who sported with my terror and anxiety, or by an emissary of Lady Melville."

"I cannot endure to hear her mentioned!" exclaimed St. Orme, starting up in great indignation.

"I have as much antipathy to her Ladyship as yourself," said Mrs. Aubrey: "but I can now hear her name with more philosophy than I might perhaps have exhibited a day or two back. But I am sure our invalid is still a little sensible of her late fatigue; for I have observed her countenance vary more than once: and as I am at this moment physician, nurse, and guardian, I shall exert my triple authority to induce her to resist all further discussion of any kind. So, my dear Caroline, you must preserve your secret yet a little longer."

At this hint St. Orme made his bow, and vanished; and Laura, more collected in his absence, could converse upon indifferent

indifferent subjects with ease and cheerfulness.

In a few hours Mrs. Hamilton called in, who had just arrived in town from the residence of her brother, to which Mrs. Aubrey had dispatched, early in the morning, a notification of the escape of Laura from the usurped tyranny of the Countess; and Mrs. Hamilton having affectionately congratulated her upon her success, informed her that she had immediately set out to assure herself that she was in tolerable health and spirits; both in compliment to her own wish, and that of her brother, of whom she made a very melancholy report.

As she was *tête à-tête* with Laura, she dwelt with generous satisfaction upon the friendly intentions of the Traherne family, who were generally known, she asserted, to be slow in resolving, but quick and certain in executing their resolutions.

"With such characters, my dear Laura," added Mrs. Hamilton, "the effects of the interest you once inspire, will be lasting; and as the old people are severely

severely mortified and disappointed in a certain instance, I predict that in you will be centered their future views and cares; of which I feel the more assured, as you are in a manner cast solely into their protection, and without any other resource but in their partiality—a circumstance that will be so far from injuring you with them, that it will essentially flatter their lofty spirit, by rendering your advancement their sole work. Another advantage you will possess, will be the reflection that your dependant situation, and the annihilation of the provision destined for you, are the result of the same depravity and wickedness, which they justly conceive to be the sources of the inquietudes they have lately experienced."

After an interesting conversation of some length, Mrs. Hamilton departed, saying, as she bade Laura adieu, that certain sisterly duties again immediately called her from London.

"I now return you your faithful Dolly," added she; "I had taken her with me to the residence of my brother; but

but I have again conducted her hither—and she is now in the house."

Laura, imagining that Dolly might perhaps be more serviceable than any other attendant who was less acquainted with the peculiarities of Captain Rothemere, offered to part with her for any time Mrs. Hamilton thought proper; but Mrs. Maunder herself had already objected to the exchange, and Laura was not much displeased to be compelled to receive her again immediately.

In the evening St. Orme returned, accompanied by his friend Horace Nevarc; who, to the secret disappointment of Laura, was proved to be the cavalier whose pursuit occasioned her so much terror the preceding day: not to merit, however, the charge of Caroline, she thanked him for his intentions, and the zeal with which he had instantly carried the intelligence of her retreat to her friends.

Mr. Nevarc, in reply, protested that he was very happy to see her so clean and composed; for he really could almost have

have believed it impossible that soap and good nursing should have done such wonders in so short a time.

Miss St. Orme smiled at this strange congratulation, which produced a corresponding effect upon the countenance of Mrs. Aubrey; whilst Cecil enquired if he had sought that well-turned compliment at the foot of Parnassus.

"No," returned he gravely; "I have done with fiction for ever!—What I said to Miss Delaunie, was immediately produced by the recollections that at that instant occupied my mind. I am now engaging in a project for the encouragement of genuine sentiments and spontaneous truths: the established principle is to be, that every man shall utter as much as he may conveniently find time for, of the images that present themselves to his imagination; and I really believe it will be the only method in the world to restore something like originality of character to our men of fashion, and genuine language to our fashionable diction."

"Can you prove that assertion?" asked St. Orme.

"The result of the experiment will very shortly and very sufficiently prove it," returned Horace: "for I believe it is on the eve of becoming very obtaining: my friends and correspondents in Germany have already made a very successful *début*, and have procured the system an assured and unfailing, as well as a very universal patronage, by bringing it forward upon their stage, from whence it will of course be received upon our's with rapture and avidity: and with a few individual and more private efforts, this advantageous improvement in conversation and the usual intercourse of society, will soon become very general."

"Is there not also a very advantageous improvement in your articulation within these two days?" asked Caroline, with a laughing mien.

"I am rejoiced that you observe it," replied he, with an immoveable aspect; "as it is a satisfactory proof of the success of my repeated endeavours to divest

myself of a very vicious pronunciation. It was a foolish habit I acquired some time back on the Continent; and the occasion of my adopting it convinces me that our present speculation will infallibly succeed: for a handful of leading democrats at Paris some time since, having agreed to cut the letter R out of the alphabet, because it was damningly conspicuous in *roi*, *royaume*, *royal*, *royauté*, *&c.* seized the helm of universal pronunciation, and issued out the fiat by virtue of their own example, which every one of the smallest consideration insensibly followed; when, if they had written and printed all the injured words, and given round a dictionary of the new stamp, the barbarous figures and sounds would have been canvassed and rejected: but example is irresistible, and when, aided by the associates I have selected, who are men of known fashion and allowed pretensions, I shall have established my *genuine* system only a few weeks, by Heaven, it will no longer be by the usual pantomime and grimace *alone* of our loungers, that all the daughters

ters of Eve will be made to comprehend that they are despised and contemned! And will not this be advancing very far in the road of virtue? What woman can then pretend that she is seduced to any deviation from rectitude, when no man, under a penalty of brutal vulgarity, will be allowed to flatter her vanity by telling her that he prizes her in an equal degree with his own ease and satisfaction?—Sir, I maintain that it will have a better effect than all the sermons of Lord Kenyon or the Bishop of London: for if our manners, divested as they are of the shadow of ancient *politesse*, and the formal old tricks practised by our forefathers, and our tongues reduced to utter the unstudied and spontaneous effusions of our minds and hearts, retain any thing seducing or alluring, the Devil himself must surely be at the sole trouble of coining the hearts and minds of the other sex."

"I confess in this view," said St. Orme, "your speculations will be a national benefit. But I have really a curiosity to learn

by what accident you have been induced to patronize the R again?"

"I am very willing to inform you," replied Nevarc, with his usual composure. "As I was turning into the Park last week, I was accosted by a black fellow, who solicited charity in French, and in giving me his history, he mentioned that he had been an artisan in Guadaloupe, who, fired with a *zéle vuaiment patuiotique*, had been made *puisonnier* on board a *fuegate*, where he had entered himself as a seaman. This dialect now for the first time struck me as unmeaning, absurd, and low, and I resolved to drop it; indeed I have long retained it only from habit; and as the keenness of my ear first led me to adopt the folly, so it equally engaged me to discard it. As for my new speculation, I am now preparing to make a very brilliant essay of it among *Meedon's girls*. I believe I shall see Lady Mary Mornay to-morrow morning, and I shall certainly favour her with a few genuine and spontaneous truths."

He

He then nodded his adieus, and vanished.

"What a whimsical creature!" exclaimed Caroline.

"He is indeed a strange being!" observed her brother: "but amidst his eccentricities he preserves a feeling heart, and a temper that nothing can ruffle."

"You are silent upon the singularities of your knight-errant," resumed Miss St. Orme, addressing Laura: "does it arise from more or less approbation than you chuse to avow?"

"I cannot understand," she replied, smiling, "whether these singularities are natural or assumed; until I do, I must suppress my opinion."

"I am in the same predicament," said Mrs. Aubrey; "if I could ascertain that the peculiarities he exhibits were *spontaneous*, I might avow the genuine truth without apprehension of disgusting his friends."

"His education and general mode of life have been unlike those of other young men," said St. Orme: "his pursuits and

studies have been solely directed by his mother, the wild wanderings of whose mutable genius have warped that of her son. I believe his singularity is not the effect of design, but of nature and habit: he is far from being destitute of talents; but they have been guided into such various and uncommon directions, that his acquirements subject him to the sneers of ridicule, rather than the admiration they were meant to excite: but he appears not to discompose himself either with the apprehension of the one, or a wish for the other; and follows the dictates of his fancy, without appearing to attend to the effect his conduct produces in the opinions and sentiments of those around him."

"I declare I do not dislike him!" exclaimed Caroline.

"It is not dislike, but raillery that he is most open to," observed Mrs. Aubrey: "many people are very well received and perfectly tolerated, because they are excellent subjects for *persiflage*."

"Now really as he is, according to Cecil, so good-natured and humane," returned

returned Miss St. Orme, "I do not see that he is so very ridiculous."

"Take care, Caroline," said her brother; "if you can neither allow yourself to laugh at such a character, or dislike it, I should suppose it would be likely to endanger your repose."

"Not so," returned she; "for before my esteem is too far engaged, I shall learn in a moment of spontaneous truth, if I am fortunate enough to occupy any portion of his attention."

Laura, who had for some time found her head rather heavy, and her throat sore, was now compelled to yield to a fit of coughing; and Mrs. Aubrey advising her to retire early, the conversation was not renewed, and St. Orme soon after withdrew. Laura was extremely anxious to learn if his father had become reconciled to him; but as she could not prevail upon herself to begin a subject of which he was the topic, her inquietude could not be removed.

CHAP. VII.

THE next morning her cold was still rather troublesome; but as it was not attended with any fever or alarming symptom, Mrs. Aubrey gave her permission to attend the breakfast table.

The wardrobe of her friends supplied her with every necessary article of apparel; and to remove any unpleasant ideas Laura might have entertained from this circumstance, the amiable Mrs. Aubrey when she paid her visit of enquiry ere her young guest had quitted her chamber, put into her hands a draft which Lady Betty had sent upon her banker, for her immediate use, because her Ladyship would not suffer any application to be made to the Countess

Countess of Melville for the restoration of her clothes, or whatever might have been left in her possession.

When Mrs. Aubrey withdrew, Dolly, bursting into the room, abruptly exclaimed—

"Lord, Ma'am, would you believe that the Marchioness has made away with herself!"

Laura starting up, ejaculated—"Good Heaven—no, I hope not!"

"Yes, it's as true as I am here!" resumed Dolly; "for when Mrs. Aubrey sent this morning to see for letters or somewhat at Lord John's, their people told it to Mr. William for a sartainty: she blowed her brains out, poor soul! and there they say, there lay upon the table a whole bottle of poison, and a letter to that old devil, her mother, and another for the Marquis;—so that will bring him to England again perhaps!"

Laura, struck with mingled horror and compassion, remained speechless and immoveable, whilst her attendant, wholly occupied with her story, continued to

relate all the incidents she had collected, until she was interrupted by the hasty return of Mrs. Aubrey, who had learned the rumour, and suspected the discretion of Dolly.

The countenance and appearance of Laura confirmed her surmises; and she endeavoured to soften as much as possible the effect of the shock, by pretending to doubt the truth of the circumstance, and insinuating that it might be considerably misrepresented.

At length Laura burst into tears; and having wept with an emotion the remembrance of her last interview with the Marchioness excited, Mrs. Aubrey left her, and she soon became sufficiently composed to rejoin her friend Caroline, whose serious and commiserating aspect denoted that she had likewise heard the catastrophe.

The breakfast was scarcely concluded, when Miss Meedon was announced to Laura, who was pleased with an opportunity of presenting her to so worthy a character as Mrs. Aubrey.

Poor

Poor Fanny appeared very dejected; yet she had a gentleness and composure in her manner, and her conversation betrayed so much good sense and sweetness of disposition, that both Miss St. Orme and her more experienced friend were charmed with her.

Mrs. Aubrey, taking occasion to entreat that she would indulge Laura so far as to pass the day with her, found her invitation accepted with a modest acknowledgment; and in about an hour Fanny was rising to return home, to intimate her absence to her mother, and make the necessary alteration in her attire, when Captain Biranly was introduced. His name effected a very visible change in her countenance, which was instantly suffused with a deep blush, and betrayed anxiety and confusion: and whilst he was addressing a congratulatory compliment to Laura, his eye caught a glance of her half-averted face, and his speech remained unfinished.

"Miss Meedon!" exclaimed he, partaking the embarrassment of Fanny.

"For the present, my dear Miss

Delaunie," said she, without appearing to regard his apostrophe, "I bid you adieu: I am happy to be enabled to make so pleasing a report of you to your late associates, who have been, by their own assertion, extremely uneasy respecting you."

She then curtsied to Mrs. Aubrey, and withdrew; and whilst the female triumvirate expressed their approbation of her sentiments and manners, Biranly, silent and reflecting, seemed not to comprehend the purport of their conversation. He was indeed unusually grave and thoughtful during the whole time of his visit, and almost forgot the design for which it was principally made: but as he was leaving the house, he suddenly returned, and telling Laura she had certainly learned how much he deserved reprehension for the detention of Mr. Aubrey's letter, entreated her forgiveness of the indiscretion by which he had been mortified and shocked to find she was such a sufferer; and assured her he was already sufficiently punished in the discovery of the effect it had produced,

and

and in the apprehension of a still greater evil which had nearly resulted from it.

Laura was so much surprised at this unexpected address, that she could not even ask an explanation of it; and Mrs. Aubrey, perceiving the unpleasant predicament in which both Biranly and herself were placed, undertook to make her comprehend his acknowledged fault, and induce her to grant the oblivion he solicited.

With this assurance he departed; and Laura immediately entreating the promised information, Mrs. Aubrey informed her that Captain Biranly happening to be present when Mrs. Hamilton received her letter from Dolly, she had read to him that part of it in which his name was mentioned: and he had been so much concerned to find himself the occasion of having precipitated her into the power of Lady Melville, "that he confessed," continued Mrs. Aubrey, "that he had bribed the groom to obtain an interview with you on your journey from Adwan: and the fellow secreted the letter whilst he was pretending to search the carriage

for it, and delivered it to him in the hope of another fee. Biranly therefore detained it in his possession, both as an introduction to you when he reached London, and that he feared, if he had returned it to the man, he would either have destroyed or lost it."

Laura had great difficulty in prevailing over the resentment which certain remembrances produced, so far as to forgive him; but as Mrs. Aubrey appeared to interest herself for the culprit, she at length pronounced his absolution. Ere the subject was entirely discarded, St. Orme appeared, who heard at his entrance a part of a sentence that gave him to understand what the topic was; and after he had enquired how the fair invalid found herself, he renewed it, by expressing great regret that he had suffered any consideration to prevent him from availing himself of an opportunity so unexpected, of better executing the commission Mr. Aubrey had given him.

Distressed by the mention of the circumstance from St. Orme, Laura merely replied

replied by a slight inclination; and he was evidently mortified by the slender interest his apology appeared to excite.

Mrs. Aubrey now informed Laura that as it was impossible to breathe the air of the metropolis without being expensive and dissipated, she had hired a carriage whilst she remained in London; though in fact, this incurred expence was much more for the proper accommodation of Sir William St. Orme's daughter, than in consideration of her own convenience: and as Lady Betty had urged the immediate re-establishment of the *child's* wardrobe, Mrs. Aubrey enquired if Laura found herself disposed to take a short round, and exert herself sufficiently to make a few purchases.

To this proposition she had not spirits to assent; and Mrs. Aubrey having kindly undertaken to be her substitute in this requisite employment, Caroline remained with her friend.

St. Orme left the room with Mrs. Aubrey, and having put her into the carriage, walked away; whilst his sister, having

having entirely expected his return, was disappointed and displeased with his abrupt departure.

"Cecil is become quite a cynic!" exclaimed she; "I had a thousand things to say to him, and he has disappeared!"

To this observation Laura was silent; and she insensibly rambled from one reflection to another, till in less than five minutes, she was lost in a contemplation which her companion did not immediately interrupt.

"You are pensive," said Miss St. Orme, who had been attentively considering her: "perhaps my presence is importunate."

"I deserve to hear that supposition," replied Laura, taking her hand, "for testifying so little my sense of your kindness: but I hope you will pardon me.—Amidst the painful images that assailed me just now, was that of Lady Bellingham's children: I cannot help feeling alarmed lest they should be neglected, abandoned as they are to servants and mercenaries.

mercenaries.—I would give the world to see and embrace them!"

"I imagine that Mrs. Aubrey will be able to indulge that wish," returned Caroline; "she has I know already seen them herself."

Laura was much pleased to hear this; and learning from her young friend that they were healthy and in good spirits, dismissed from her mind some part of her anxiety upon their account. She heard too, in the course of her *tête-à-tête* with Miss St. Orme, that Sir William had so far relented towards her brother and herself, as to allow them very proper appointments.

"But the situation of Cecil is still so altered," added his sister, when she related this, "that although he is as well provided with money now as many young men of higher fashion than himself, yet I perceive he is not pleased with the different aspects he encounters, now that he is likely to participate with a young brood, as Nevare expresses it, and that he can no longer give great dinners, or invite half his

his associates to the *agrémens* of a country residence, where they drank and hunted at his expence. Mrs. Aubrey says it is an excellent change; and I should submit entirely to her opinion, did I not fear that Cecil would become an absolute misanthrope."

"He was not always then so grave?" asked Laura, in a timid voice.

"Oh no," replied his sister; "on the contrary, he was cheerful and lively!"

At this moment the return of Mrs. Aubrey interrupted the conference; and Laura never before thought her presence ill-timed: but she had now an earnest inclination to hear something further of St. Orme; or at least of continuing that kind of conversation, in which his name, his expectations, his character, or his views might become the topic: for she experienced an increasing interest in his favour, though his manner had latterly sometimes mortified and sometimes displeased her.

When Laura had first beheld him, he was suffering from the generous warmth

with

with which he had espoused the interests of his sister, forgetful of his own: the fondness of Mrs. Aubrey's children, and the high esteem and consideration of their parents, all concurred in proving that his character was amiable and good, and Laura readily lent her belief to these testimonies. His person was fine, his mien graceful, and his countenance noble and interesting: but these advantages were not obtruded upon the observation of every one by the impertinent vanity of fine attitudes, or the affectation of that decided superiority that lends the power of dictating manners, modes, language, and sentiments: and without observing that she formed the comparison, Laura sickened at the recollected presumption and ill-concealed insolence of Mr. Averne, when she had seen and heard St. Orme.

When Mrs. Aubrey had reported progress, and received the thanks of her young charge for the trouble she had taken, they separated to dress; and Laura found Mrs. Forster in her apartment, waiting with great impatience to see her. This good woman congratu-

congratulated her upon her re-established happiness and comfort, with tears in her eyes: she expressed, however, some regret that she could not remain with Mrs. Aubrey, and hoped that Lady Betty Traherne would be as good-natured as she ought to be.

"If I should not find her Ladyship quite so amiable as I could wish," said Laura, "I must console myself with the reflection that she is at least such a protectress as the world will approve; and that under her roof I shall enjoy the esteem of others as well as my own."

"I see, my Miss Laura," said the good woman, "that you are very prudent and discreet; and that my dear Lady did not take all the pains I heard she took, for nothing. But I hope Lady Betty will not be very ill-natured and severe—I should be grieved to the heart if I thought she would!"

This further confirmation of the temper and disposition of the lady gave Laura some very uneasy sensations, and she did not think of interrupting the harangue of

of Mrs. Forster, who continued to express her hopes, fears, and expectations, until Laura was informed that Miss Meedon had been in the drawing-room some minutes.

The good woman withdrew at this intimation, and Laura hastened to meet her friend.

Poor Fanny looked at intervals unusually grave, though she evidently wished to appear cheerful; and at every approach of steps towards the door of the apartment, betrayed agitation and alarm. Laura longed to restore her to composure by an insinuation that Biranly would not again be there during the day; for into an apprehension of his re-appearance, she rightly translated the inquietude of Miss Meedon: but her own delicacy withheld her from venturing a hint that might shock that of another, and she compelled herself to silence.

A few minutes before the dinner was announced, St. Orme returned; and his sister complaining of his unexpected desertion in the morning, he excused it by pleading

pleading an engagement, which the permission of Mrs. Aubrey to join her party at the present moment, had hastened.

As if to illustrate the recent assertion of Caroline, he was now cheerful and animated. Fanny Meedon, soothed by the gentle attentions of Mrs. Aubrey and her younger friends, was serene and composed, and Laura forgot for the time her past distress, and lurking fears for the future; and except when the catastrophe of the unfortunate Lady Bellingham suddenly recurred to her, felt delighted and happy.

In the evening a letter was presented to Mrs. Aubrey, which she immediately pronounced to be from Lady Betty; and having read it with an altered countenance, presented it at length to Laura, who received it with a trembling hand and a face of inquietude: and she discovered, to her extreme mortification and concern, that it contained a request that *the child* might be conducted to her the next day, and that Mrs. Aubrey and Miss St. Orme would

would endeavour to make it convenient to dine with her.

Laura having read this mandate, still retained it under her eyes which had unconsciously filled with tears, and she now dreaded to look up; whilst Caroline, who well divined the unwelcome contents of the hated scroll, seated herself by the side of her motionless friend, and begged her in a tone of anxiety, to dispel if possible their fears lest the unreasonable old woman had sent to demand her.

"Miss Meedon and Cecil," added she, "are suffering the same painful suspense as myself: tell us, my dear Laura, that you are not to be snatched away thus early!"

Laura, raising her eyes, encountered those of St. Orme, which did not contradict the assertion of his sister: but fortunately for her feelings, Mrs. Aubrey gave the required information; and expressed so kindly her regret, that the tears of Laura borrowed the colouring of gratitude for their source, and she suffered them to fall with less reluctance. She had conceived such a dread of Lady Betty, that the terror

terror of being under her dominion much added to her uneasy sensations, which the whole party in a considerable degree shared; and the remainder of the evening was passed in forced efforts to overcome this unpleasant interruption to the vivacity it had dispelled.

Mrs. Aubrey introduced the subject of the approaching return of Lord John and her husband, to remind Laura that she was not wholly dependant on the will and pleasure of her unknown but austere patroness: and the hope of their ameliorating interference rather cheered her gloomy presages; and not only Laura, but St. Orme appeared revived by the prospect.

When Miss Meedon departed, Laura earnestly requested that she would not forget her.

"That is impossible," returned Fanny: "and if I am permitted the satisfaction of sometimes hearing from you, and enquiring by letter into your welfare, which will ever interest me, I will amply prove my remembrance and my esteem."

Mrs. Aubrey, to whom she had looked for

for the half-requested permission, took her hand, and assured her that if she were known to Lady Betty Traherne, her Ladyship must acquiesce with readiness in a proposal which could be only productive of benefit and amusement to her young friend.

Much gratified by a kindness to which she had been so little accustomed, Fanny pressed her hand in silence, and hastily flew to the carriage which she had ventured to order, and was now fearful of detaining.

Caroline having again still more decisively expressed her favourable sentiments of Miss Meedon, now reverted to her regret at the sudden departure of Laura.

"I thought Lady Betty would have suffered you to remain with us at least two or three weeks," said she; "for I heard so much of her deranged health and weakened nerves, that I imagined it must have cost her a month nursing up before she was wholly recovered; and in three days behold she is reinstated, and sends to claim you! When our good Mr. Aubrey returns, however, I hope you will be extri-

cated from her clutches; for really I cannot imagine any degree of favour attached to a residence with such a woman as she is represented to be: I am sure you would be much happier at Adwan."

"Ah, much more than perhaps I may deserve to be," Laura replied: "I review those pleasing days I passed at Adwan, in the hospitable dwelling of my dear Mrs. Aubrey, with never-ceasing regret!"

"They will shortly be renewed then, I hope," said this amiable woman; "*en attendant*, you will find your new friend I trust, less formidable than our thoughtless Caroline chuses to represent her: at least her Ladyship entertains a very strong predilection for you, which I am well assured your sentiments and conduct will perpetually increase."

St. Orme, who had been in a deep reverie for some time, now rose to depart: he did not particularly bid Laura farewell, and she beheld him leave the room with less concern than she might have felt, had not a secret hope pervaded her beating heart that he would make an effort to see her the next morning.

CHAP.

CHAP. VIII.

SHE passed the night without much rest; and rising before Dolly announced the hour, descended to the breakfast-room ere it was yet occupied by Caroline or their mutual friend.

In a few minutes however, Miss St. Orme who had heard her step, joined her.

"Mrs. Aubrey is very earnestly engaged," said she, "in providing for your decoration: this sudden summons of Lady Betty puts us all into consternation and confusion! Tell me, my dear Laura, are you equally chagrined with myself at our separation?"

"I am more grieved at the necessity of it," replied she, "than it would be proper

for me to express, under the circumstances that induce Lady Betty to extend her protection to me: yet I am compelled by your generous friendship to acknowledge, that my reluctance to sacrifice your society and that of Mrs. Aubrey, can scarcely yield even to my inclination of testifying to her Ladyship how much I respect her commands."

"I am sorry and very angry," returned Caroline, "that your reluctance to quit us, can yield to any sentiment Lady Betty inspires."

"It does not," said Laura, embracing her; "but yet I believe it should. Ah, Caroline! in leaving the roof of Mrs. Aubrey, I quit a dear asylum from every grief, and I feel as if I were entering a dreary wilderness, without shelter, or a point of rest!"

As she uttered the last words, St. Orme entered; and guessing from the earnest voice of Laura, the subject that occupied them, he now for the first time expressed his concern at her approaching absence.

"Yes, every one laments it," said his sister:

sister: "but I began to think, Cecil, that your philosophy would prevent you from participating in our chagrin."

"If I possess any philosophy at another moment," replied he, "it has now, however, deserted me; but before I venture to add my tribute to the general expression of regret which the flight of your amiable friend creates, I must first avail myself of your interest, Caroline, to procure if possible an amnesty of my offences, which, though dictated and impelled by a sentiment Miss Delaunie must universally inspire, yet I am sensible that this sentiment is usually very differently expressed."

"What is this enigma?" demanded Miss St. Orme; "and what are these offences, Laura, of which you never informed me?"

"Your brother merits my gratitude," replied she, blushing, "not my displeasure: and as he now appears to think he was induced to judge me with too much harshness, I must forget the pain I once

suffered from his error, and remember only the benefit he meant to confer."

St. Orme raised her hand to his lips.

"There wanted not the generosity of this exculpation," said he, "to convince me of my own extreme want of judgment in the too hasty opinion I once suffered myself to express: and now I must still martyrize the curiosity of Caroline, whilst I signalize the superior discrimination of Navarc, who without variation, and through the artifices of that fiend Lady Melville, proclaimed your repugnance to her views, and predicted your steady rejection of them."

"And were not you equally just?" asked Caroline, in a tone of reproach. "Ah Cecil! are all women in your eyes unprincipled crocodiles until they have passed an ordeal; and do you reject the candour and ingenuousness which no stubborn fact emblazons?"

"Your censure is well applied," said he, gravely; "and I am fortunate that in the instance that calls it forth, your lovely friend is less disposed to exercise the severity

rity of justice: yet I might perhaps from the recollection of repeated experience, seek a partial exculpation; for I have been hitherto actually weary of eternally beholding the hypocritical semblance of the varied and amiable qualifications I have never yet found assembled but in that mind I again acknowledge with extreme compunction, to have outraged by injurious suspicions."

This flattering intimation produced a deep blush upon the cheek of Laura; and the generous satisfaction of Miss St. Orme almost equalled her's.

"Now that at length you condescend to render due justice to my friend," exclaimed she, "I forgive you all that impenetrable gravity of which I have lately so much complained: and I begin to think that you will not turn misanthrope, and overwhelm us with epigram and sarcasm, since you avow that you have happily found one fair and candid mind amidst the crowd of specious hypocrites, of whom you so vehemently complain."

"But having discovered it," returned

her brother,' 'I must lament that this long-sought combination of all that is amiable and good, is so suddenly snatched from my view. Lady Betty Traherne is, I fear, a most inexorable dragon and will guard her lovely charge from the profane approach of those unhappy mortals who do not participate in her favour."

The entrance of Mrs. Aubrey now relieved the painful confusion of Laura, who with an extreme inclination to break the silence for which she reproached herself, could not call to her assistance a single sentence, or one idea she would have chosen to utter.

St. Orme took his breakfast with them; but was soon after compelled to go, because he discerned that his presence impeded those discussions with mantua-makers and milliners, which Mrs. Aubrey informed him were indispensable. He announced his intention, however, of escorting the party to the mansion of Lady Betty, which was five or six miles from town; and Mrs. Aubrey consented without difficulty to the proposition.

Laura

Laura then, with an imagination very differently occupied, submitted herself to the discretion of fashion-mongers and attire-women, whilst Miss St. Orme bewailed their enforced separation, which every passing moment hastened.

Dolly had been dispatched by her young Lady to Mrs. Forster, to inform her of her immediate removal; and this worthy creature now came to bid adieu to her dear Miss Laura, who shed tears at her strong and unfeigned expressions of attachment, and would have forced upon her acceptance a pecuniary testimony of her goodwill, which Mrs. Aubrey had, in pursuance of Lady Betty's instructions, enabled her to do: but this was positively refused, with a distant intimation that this faithful creature would be much delighted with any trifle that had belonged to her dear Lady.

Laura then dividing a lock of her mother's hair, which she wore in a small gold case, presented half of it in the trinket to poor Nancy, who kissing it with

great devotion, declared it should be buried with her.

She then with some difficulty prevailed upon herself to go, after having called upon Heaven to bless her Miss Laura, and obtaining a promise that she would inform her whenever she should happen to remain a day or two in town, that she might wait upon her, and just ask how she did;—a request which was very readily granted.

At two o'clock they were to be *en route*; for Lady Betty dined at four precisely, and Mrs. Aubrey thought it necessary to allow a short time before the repast, for the introduction of Laura.

A little before the appointed hour St. Orme returned: his horses were at the door; but he was invited to take a seat in the carriage, which he eagerly accepted.

The party were rather silent and abstracted; but ere Laura could imagine they had proceeded a mile, Mrs. Aubrey pointing out the mansion of her ancient patroness, Caroline renewed her expressed reluctance to give up her society; whilst

St. Orme gazed at the place in a reverie not of a very lively kind.

"Does not Lady Betty occasionally reside in town?" asked his sister.

"She has not slept in London, I believe," replied Mrs. Aubrey, "for twenty years back: but I hope her Ladyship will sometimes allow us to detain our dear little friend in those visits which she has almost promised to indulge me with."

"How can I express those grateful sensations that swell my heart!" exclaimed Laura, with an emotion she could not repress: "stranger, alien as I am to you and my dear Miss St. Orme, with what benevolence and kindness have you soothed and cherished me! Fortunate for me was the hour that brought the good Lord John to Adwan, to bestow upon me such friends!"

"And fortunate likewise, you should add," said Mrs. Aubrey, smiling, "the ready discernment which enabled him to comprehend how fully you were worthy of the anxiety he immediately experienced for your happiness."

"Now I believe, my good Cecil," continued she, "we must dismiss you; for I fear Lady Betty——"

He did not allow her time to conclude the sentence; but instantly gave the signal for the carriage to stop; and taking the hand of Laura, pronounced a simple adieu, pressed it to his lips, and mounting his horse, was out of sight in a minute; whilst Laura, confounded at the promptitude of his departure, sat with a varying countenance, and a mien irresolute, anxious, and confused.

Mrs. Aubrey ordered the carriage to proceed; and Caroline, with her eyes fixed upon her friend, appeared to be revolving some very profound discovery.

The ideas of Laura were, however, soon irresistibly impelled by her nearer approach to the house, to revert to her meeting with Lady Betty, the exterior of whose dwelling was not calculated to inspire very pleasing or lively impressions of its inhabitant; for it was a very ancient-looking brick building, striped, *du haut en bas,* with flat, white, heavy, unmeaning pilasters,

pilasters, with an uncommon number of windows, clumsily arched and roofed with stone-work, and a door-way to correspond

After passing a long and straight avenue that led from the road to the mansion, the adventurous approach of unhallowed steps was impeded by a parapet wall, crowned with a thick iron railing, very ingeniously wrought into a variety of geometrical figures, and flanked on either side by ponderous gates, that led into a Mosaic-paved court, in the middle of which stood a sort of obelisk, surmounted by an immense, ugly, square lamp, answering in size and figure to two others that were affixed to the railing.

"What a melancholy place!" exclaimed Caroline. "My dear Mrs. Aubrey, I cannot endure the idea of leaving our Laura here!"

"I would we could prevail on Lady Betty to suffer her to return to town with us!" replied Mrs. Aubrey: "but I fear——"

The carriage now stopped; and as it had

had been seen in the avenue, two old and white-headed domestics hastened to one of the iron gates, and contriving with their united strength to throw it open, they hurried back to receive the guests at the door of the house; and their figures on their return extorted a smile from Miss St. Orme, for the one was paralytic and the other gouty; yet they affected to hobble and limp with great solemnity and decorum.

The visitors were conducted through a large hall into an oak-wainscotted saloon, and Laura felt a short reprieve on finding it vacant; but her heart beat at every step resounding in the hall, which could be very plainly distinguished in the apartment, though the door was closed.

At length a spare tall figure, in a rose-coloured satin gown and petticoat, with a pale shrivelled aspect shrouded in an immense blond-lace cap, stalked into the room, and in a slow distinct tone, intimated that Lady Betty begged the favour of Mrs. Aubrey to conduct the young lady to her dressing-room.

Caroline

Caroline therefore, who now experienced a decided and increasing antipathy to her Ladyship, remained alone in the saloon; and her trembling friend ascended the wide staircase with Mrs. Aubrey, and was introduced by the rose-coloured satined ambassadress into another dark wainscotted room, hung round with every denomination of antediluvian needle-work, in massive gilt frames.

From the open folds of an immense Indian screen at the upper end, issued Lady Betty Traherne; and Mrs. Aubrey, taking the hand of the shrinking Laura, presented her with a silent salutation, and in silence the old Lady gazed upon her, until a strange and unknown sensation caused her to raise her hand to her face; and perceiving that her cheek was moist—"I have a bad cold, Mrs. Aubrey!" she hastily exclaimed, and led the way without further ceremony to the interior of her screen, in which were placed a table and two chairs: and as her Ladyship's cold was now no longer very troublesome, she desired Laura, by the appellation of *child*, to procure

procure herself a seat; who obeyed with an additional depression of spirits.

Mrs. Aubrey having started one or two indifferent subjects, now waited with some impatience for Lady Betty to take a more flattering notice of her interesting charge: but this was a condescension she could not by any means immediately prevail upon her dignity to allow of; for notwithstanding a regard of rather a tender kind, that was fast springing up in a heart which for more than seventy years, had scarcely ever before admitted one gentle impulse, she could not fail to recollect that Laura was not a Traherne, though her blood was partially ennobled. Her Ladyship was besides a very powerful advocate for humility and profound submission in young and pretty *grisettes*, to their superiors in honours, fortune, and years: and she actually turned away her softened regards more than once, that she might not make the girl vain, and fancy herself of importance.

Yet, spite of her efforts, a sentiment rather resembling remorse and regret, stole over

over her mind when Laura looked like her mother: and to crown her conquest, Lady Betty discovered that her height, hair, complexion, her hand, arm, and under lip, all denoted that she had indisputable pretensions to a half-bred alliance with her family.

"I shall make a fool of this child!" thought her Ladyship, rising suddenly; and she rung to desire that Miss St. Orme might be conducted up stairs.

The afternoon passed without a single sentence of particular import from Lady Betty, except that she enquired if Mrs. Aubrey had been so kind to procure the *child* a new wardrobe. So that Laura began to indulge a hope that the meaning of the letter had been misconceived by her friends and herself, and that at present she had only been required for a few hours.

But when the carriage was ordered to convey Mrs. Aubrey and Caroline to town, she discovered this pleasing idea to be very erroneous, for her patroness then enquired if any baggage had been brought; and Mrs.

Mrs. Aubrey having satisfied this demand, hinted her expectation of the performance of the promise that gave her to hope the honour of seeing Lady Betty and her young friend in town.

"Yes, I shall drive to town next week, I believe," replied the ancient dame; "and if the child behaves prettily, I shall perhaps bring her with me."

Caroline was extremely disgusted with this condescension; but Mrs. Aubrey thought proper to receive it with a grateful acknowledgment: and observing that the heart and the eyes of Laura were full, she considerately shortened her farewell compliment, which consisted of little more than a fervent pressure of the hand, and then hurried her young companion away.

Laura now felt completely forlorn and disconsolate, and with difficulty repressed her tears: fortunately for her, Lady Betty was still unwilling to trust herself in a *tête à-tête*, so she rung for Miss Winteram; and the rose-coloured satin, which had

had been eclipsed after its first appearance, now again came upon the scene.

Miss Winteram entered the saloon with a low curtsy; and having adjusted the tabouret of the patroness, and arranged her work properly upon the table, very composedly took up a large folio, and in an audible and solemn key plunged into a most elaborate history of the Martyrs.

Laura endeavoured to listen with proper respect and attention: but at length the rays of the setting sun stole over the spot where she sat, and claimed both regard and regret. The evening was uncommonly fine, and she followed in idea the carriage of her friends, beheld St. Orme awaiting their arrival, and passing at the house of Mrs. Aubrey two or three hours, which, as she painted them to her imagination, urged forward the drops that had for some time trembled in her eyes.

The recollection of his expressions in the morning occurred to her; and the suddenness of his departure on the road, which, arose, she flattered herself, from a

regret

regret he did not wish to display the extent of, all passed in review; and before she had concluded her reverie, the lights had been long introduced, the butler tottered into the room to announce the supper, and Miss Winteram, closing her book, clasped it carefully together, replaced it, put up Lady Betty's work, and drawing the stool from her feet, awaited her rising.

Her Ladyship then walked towards the door, but the obsequious companion was still immoveable: and Laura, finding that precedence was strictly attended to, curtsied, to intimate to this good gentlewoman, who was at least three times her age, that she would follow her: but Lady Betty observing the ceremonial, settled the affair by calling to Laura to advance, who very unwillingly claimed this allowed pre-eminence of a spurious twig of the Trahernes over a legal scion of the Winterams.

The supper was formally served up in the same room where the party had dined; which was distinguished as an eating-room

room from the other apartments by a ponderous marble sideboard, and two large cisterns of the same consistency placed on each side of it, into which a pair of Gorgon heads occasionally spouted two streams of water.

This sideboard was well covered with a large quantity of plate, chased in a superb style, and comprehending on the vases, ewers, &c. a very learned representation of almost the whole heathen mythology. Yet this magnificence imparted no reflected satisfaction to the saddened bosom of Laura, who experienced something like consolation however, when a clock striking eleven, gave Lady Betty a signal that it was time to withdraw.

As her Ladyship passed the domestics, who were all drawn up in the hall when she quitted the eating saloon, she enquired with great solemnity how the coachman was, and was answered that he was not yet suffered to rise; but he hoped to be able to drive her Ladyship again in a week.

"What

"What does Mr. Williamson say to that?" asked Lady Betty.

"Mr. Williamson," the butler said, "was afraid not; for John's hands were so contracted by the rheumatics that had settled in them, that considering he was an old man, he thought they would never come to again."

"Then tell that young man that I retain him for another month," returned her Ladyship: "but when he airs the horses, order him not to go so fast—I observed him trotting yesterday like a post-boy;—I do not approve of such harum-scarum doings!"

The old butler bowed assent, and her Ladyship, followed by Laura and Miss Winteram, passed on.

When the party had mounted to the first story, Lady Betty stopped, and wished Laura a good night, saying that Miss Winteram would conduct her to her chamber: and though Laura very respectfully returned the salutation, yet her Ladyship apparently awaited something further: and at length admonished by the example

of

of the companion, she made an essay in the art of bending the joints of her knees to the utmost extent of their flexibility, and sinking towards the ground. But spite of her youth and superior activity, Miss Winteram much excelled her in this exercise by the advantage of long practice: and when her Ladyship walked forward, this complaisant virgin led the way to the apartment destined for the new inmate.

It was separated from that of her Ladyship by a long gallery, terminated by a dozen steps in ascent; and again another passage, which opened into a small anti-room, hung round with an olive-coloured paper, adorned with a crimson running pattern of large velvet pionies and poppies. The chair-bottoms were worked in worsted, to correspond with this tasty decoration; a dull-looking Turkey carpet occupied the center of the room, and a dark green moreen curtain fell with gloomy amplification, to exclude the air that might perchance have penetrated from a large sash window, and took in at least half the side

of

of the room. A furbelowed muslin toilet, and a large old-fashioned ebony framed toilet-glass, completed the furniture: but the barbarous mirror, which was joined horizontally, according to the antique economy rather above the center, cut in twain either the head dress or face of every peering damsel who stood before it: but to atone for such an outrage, the mirror itself was adorned with an immense muslin top-knot very well starched, and a pair of streamers that extended to the floor on either side.

"This, Ma'am, is your dressing-room," said Miss Winteram, in slow precise accents: "the chamber beyond it is your sleeping-room, and the light closet at the extremity is for your maid.—Ma'am I wish you a very good night."

And with a curtsy not quite so profound as if it had been to Lady Betty, the companion retired.

Laura returned the double compliment with great decorum; and when she found herself alone, sunk upon a chair, and resting her arms upon the toilet, let her head fall

fall upon them, and in two minutes her melancholy reflections suffused her whole countenance with tears.

Dolly, whose existence she had at this moment wholly forgotten, entering suddenly, made her start up; and perceiving the emotion of her young Lady, Mrs. Maunder set down her candle, and drawing out her handkerchief, began crying likewise.

This unexpected accompaniment surprised Laura; and drying her own tears, she demanded the occasion that called forth those of her *suivante*.

"Why, Ma'am," replied Dolly, holding up her handkerchief with both her hands, and applying it to her eyes when necessary, "it's enough to make a body cry, to think of living any time with such a set of poor, sick, lame, old creeturs as there is below stairs, all grunting and groaning and wincing and whining!—As I hope to be saved, it's more liker a hospital than a servants' hall—there isn't one of 'em hale and hearty, but Mrs Priscilla, her Ladyship's woman; and she's sich an

antikity scarecrow, that she puts one in mind of a dry ottomy! And then sich old grumpty notions as they've all got crammed into their old heads!—There's no second table; but they all eats in the moloncholy old stoned servants' hall—and such a sembling together, sure nobody ever seed with their eyes. I'm sure her Ladyship must have a hard heart, not to give 'em a trifle a-piece, to live out their old years upon, and let 'em all get to their own hearth-side snug and comfortable, as sich poor infirmity creeturs oft to do; but she's one, I suppose, as will have her pennyworth out of every body afore she's done with 'em!—Well, bad as Lady Melville was, it wasn't so disagreeable in her house as this is!"

"Do not say so, Dolly," said her young Lady, rather cheered by the reflection that she had escaped the wiles of the dreaded Countess: "let me entreat that you do not speak of Lady Betty but with respect; and if you continue to think your residence here not so pleasing as you could wish, I hope to be enabled, on a future day,

day, to recompense you for sacrificing your inclinations to my comfort."

"Well, Lord, it mayn't be for long," replied Dolly, "who knows!—well, Ma'am, as you desire it, I won't say a word more—only as I found you a crying, it sot me off too; so, as my heart was full, out it all come!"

Laura thanked her for her ready acquiescence, and went to her repose with a mind rather relieved: in fact, the comparison drawn by Mrs. Maunder between her present abode and that of Lady Melville, by sinking the intervening one of Mrs. Aubrey, almost reconciled her to her fate.

"If the manners of Lady Betty are repulsive," thought she, "and her dwelling gloomy, at least I may be assured that my fame will not be endangered under her roof, or my peace destroyed either by artful machinations, or violence and illegal oppression!"

With this reflection Laura laid her head upon her pillow; and having given a few sighs to the *agrémens* of the little house-

hold she had been compelled so abruptly to quit, and having deprecated the early return of Mrs. Aubrey to her Adwan residence, she sunk to sleep.

CHAP. IX.

AT seven o'clock precisely, Mrs. Priscilla entered the apartment the next morning to call her, by the direction of Lady Betty; but, as Laura had already learned from her patroness that she was an early riser, she was then up: and, until her presence was required, she walked in the gardens belonging to the house, which were tolerably extensive, and duly encompassed by very high walls: the walks were uncommonly spacious, and entirely straight, and not being much encumbered with the "shade of melancholy boughs,"

in traversing them, it was impossible for the mind or the person to wander in romantic mazes.

Yet Laura found the air pleasant and reviving; and having taken refuge from the sun, under the umbrage of a wall, she walked until half after eight, when she returned to the house because she understood it to be the breakfast hour of Lady Betty, who complimented her upon her early rising; but concluded the eulogium, which was in truth rather Spartan, by enquiring how she had employed herself; and upon the reply of Laura—

"What!" she exclaimed, "passed the whole time in idleness! Oh fie, fie! What is the end of getting up, if you are not doing any thing useful?"

"If your Ladyship," said the abashed Laura, "will condescend to inform me how you desire to see me occupied, I will not in future merit the same censure."

"Well, child," returned Lady Betty, rather mollified, "I will contrive a piece of work for you by to-morrow: and to-day you may help Winteram with her carpet."

Laura heard this arrangement with proper respect; and from breakfast until the party separated to dress for dinner, the Lady and her ill-paired dependants continued to ply the needle with a most Ariadne-like perseverance, except for one half-hour, when her Ladyship (wrapped in an ancient arm-holed cloak, lined and adorned with ermine, with Miss Winteram equally fenced against the impertinence of an insidious zephyr, supporting her steps on the one side, and Laura on the other) marched in very slow time up and down a broad pavement at the back of the house.

After dinner, the elder ladies sat very upright in their chairs, and nodded for about an hour; but Laura could not avoid remarking that Miss Winteram resisted the potent invader sleep, until it had previously illustrated its power over Lady Betty, and then, according to *etiquette*, she likewise yielded to its influence—whilst Laura sighed and meditated.

The evening passed as the former had done; and at eleven they again withdrew for the night.

Spite

Spite of the philosophy with which she endeavoured to arm herself, the prospect of passing many such days weighed very heavily upon the spirits of Laura; and Dolly not immediately appearing, she sat disconsolate and forlorn in her gloomy dressing-room, not so much requiring her assistance, as indulging an inclination to converse with her as a sort of fellow-sufferer.

In a short time, however, Mrs. Maunder hurried to her, and excused her tardiness by mentioning what had detained her.

"They axed me in to see the sideboard of plate," said Dolly; "so I went to get a peep at it; for the old butler said it was very grand, and had belonged to her Ladyship's family by the mother's side; and do you know, Miss Laura, those poor old creeturs have to take it every night, bit by bit, without leaving a spoon behind, to the iron closet, and then the key is carried to her Ladyship; so seeing them so busy a stumping to and fro, and puffing and blowing, I could not but lend a hand, for I knew you wouldn't make many

words about my staying a bit!—and Lord, I hoped 'em to do it in half the time!"

Laura commended her humanity, and encouraged her to continue her good offices; and after an interchange of future hopes and expectations, which highly gratified honest Dolly, and soothed the *ennui* of her young Lady, they separated for the night.

It was nearly one o'clock ere Laura forgot her dreary prospects in a slumber; and to her imagination she could not have slept an hour, when she was awakened by a noise that resembled some heavy substance falling in the chamber over her's: it sounded, she thought, like a person dropping from a bed to the floor; and the idea immediately occurred, that one of the poor old domestics might be in a fit.

Under this painful impression she started up, in the intention of sending Dolly to alarm the other servants, when her faculties were all suspended by horror on distinguishing a distant and feeble cry of "Murder!" that appeared to proceed from a poor wretch in the last pangs.

Another

Another sound now approached from the passage leading to her apartment, and the dressing-room door was thrown open. At this moment Laura fully expected the accomplishment of her destiny; but after an articulation of strange accents, a voice above the rest exclamed—"I tell you, d—mnation, it is only a spare nook! Haven't we secured 'em all but the old devil of a Dowager?"

The sounds now receded; and Laura, pale, motionless, and almost pulseless, comprehended that the house was occupied by ruffians, who deliberately intended to take the life of the unhappy Lady Betty.

She wished to prevent it; and sliding softly from her bed, meant, but without any definite purpose, to awaken Dolly; yet ere she could obtain courage to creep towards the closet where she slept, she thought she heard a step in the passage; but it retreated again, and all was quiet. A cold shivering seized her whole frame, which shook with violence, and her teeth clashed as in an ague. Instinctively she

felt for some garment, and throwing a dressing-gown round her, advanced with a stealing pace, and instantly encountered the extended hand of a person who approached from the closet. Too much agitated to reflect that it was most probably Dolly herself who might be seeking protection from her fears by the side of her mistress, Laura fled, and bursting into the dressing-room, crossed it, and found herself suddenly, and without knowing where she was, in the passage. A man with a lanthorn stood near the door of her apartment, who retreated several steps with marks of astonishment and horror, when she appeared; and in his fixed regard and glaring eye, she beheld destruction so certain, that she awaited the expected blow in breathless silence.

The lanthorn shook in his hand, and the sound appalling her yet more, she at length uttered a fearful shriek, and flying with noiseless steps into the gallery, wildly advanced towards a light she discerned through a half opened door, and discovered herself to be in the apartment of Lady Betty,

Betty, who had been dragged from her bed by the ruffians then surrounding her, and urged with dreadful imprecations to produce her money, plate, and jewels.

"What is that?" exclaimed one of the villains, in quick accents. The rest looked round, and started; and a pause ensued.

In this momentary interim, created by the superstition and cowardice of guilt, a sudden uproar arose at some distance from the apartment.

"Where could Tom Barrow have been," exclaimed one of the men, "that he gave no signal!"

"The old woman shall tell no tales by God!" cried another, with a menacing action.

"Do not—do not murder her!" Laura ejaculated, in an agony of horror that superseded for the moment any apprehension for herself.

Again every eye was turned to her; and unknowing what she said, in a low yet distinct voice, she unconsciously uttered that dread commandment—"Thou shalt do no murder!"

Two of the ruffians now darted away; and two more who yet remained, listening to the commotion that appeared to approach the apartment, alternately regarded her and Lady Betty with malignancy and irresolute terror. The voices of their comrades called to them to follow their steps, and after a momentary hesitation they complied: but at the door, the wretch who had threatened the life of Lady Betty, suddenly turned back, and his companion guessing the intention with which he did so, caught his arm, and dragging him away—

"Let her alone, Jack," said he, "and come along. Would you stay to be——"

The sentence was interrupted by the report of fire-arms, and they hastily disappeared, leaving a light burning upon the dressing-table.

Laura could not yet believe that either her ancient companion or herself were by any means safe; but after listening a few seconds to the sounds of contention that reached her ear, she suddenly flew to the door, and closing it with eager trepidation, let

let fall a night-bolt, and Lady Betty then recovered her recollection sufficiently to aid her efforts by double-locking and barring it; which was scarcely done, when some one pushed against it with a violence that shook the room, and cracked the frame-work of the door-case.

From this moment Laura recollected nothing further, until she found herself upon a bed, at the side of which sat Lady Betty in a sort of stupor, and Dolly was leaning over her, applying hartshorn and vinegar, whilst Miss Winteram clung to the curtains, and sobbed with hysterical violence.

"Are they gone?" asked Laura, in a faint voice.

"Yes, they are taken care of; and I hope they'll come to be hanged!" returned Dolly. "Come, Ma'am, all the danger's over now, so don't tremble and take on so!"

With her assistance Laura raised herself; and perceiving Lady Betty reclining in a great chair, with a most cadaverous-looking

looking aspect, she enquired if her Ladyship was hurt.

"No," replied she, turning towards Laura, with very little appearance of tenderness either in her tone or manner, "I am not hurt; but how are you, child?"

"And is no one hurt then?" resumed the anxious enquirer.

"Not materially, I hope," returned Lady Betty; who having now leisure and presence of mind to look round her, observed in what an useless manner Miss Winteram was employing herself.

Her reprimand restored the good damsel to her recollection with wonderful expedition, and she was then commissioned to superintend the warming of some spiced wine, to recover her patroness from the cold which had seized her right honourable stomach. Her Ladyship next directed Dolly to get the child's clothes, and dress her, that she might not catch a rheumatism by sitting in such slender attire; and Mrs. Priscilla at this moment joining the party, with a mien of staring open-

open-mouthed consternation, she was instantly ordered to bring the mantle worn by her Lady the preceding morning, to wrap round her.

But the poor creature, who had been sharing the fate of the other domestics, and had not long been released from the bonds bestowed upon her by the depredators, had not yet sufficiently recovered the operation of her terror, to obey any other command than that of attending the repeated summons of Lady Betty; and Laura, perceiving her situation, offered her services or those of Dolly: but her Ladyship would not by any means receive them, and having vainly repeated the order to Mrs. Priscilla three distinct times, she awaited with a grim aspect the return of Miss Winteram, who at length appeared with a salver, and Laura was desired to drink a part of the wine.

The companion related that it was suspected by the servants that the young man who acted as coachman, was a party in the attempt which had so fortunately failed; as one of the villains had intimated something

thing to that effect, and the fellow had been secured.

Lady Betty, raising her hands and eyes, deprecated the wickedness of the age; and Laura, no longer able to restrain the curiosity that urged her to the enquiry, demanded by what providential circumstance the wretches had been discovered, and overpowered.

She then learned that the old coachman had appeared so helpless, weak, and ill, that they would not waste their time in dragging him from his bed, and binding him, as they imagined it impossible he could oppose or obstruct their design; but the poor man comprehending their purpose, had collected his whole strength to crawl from his apartment over the stabling, to a public-house facing the end of the avenue, where he had given the alarm, and some Dragoons quartered there, had hastened with their arms to the succour of the family.

When the day dawned, Lady Betty dismissed Laura and Miss Winteram, to prepare for their immediate removal to London;

London; for the shock she had received was so potent, that she could not command fortitude enough to remain in her violated mansion, but had decided to inhabit, for the present, that of her brother's in town; a determination that almost compensated to Laura for the affright and horror she had sustained.

At seven, she partook of Lady Betty's breakfast; and from that hour until noon, assisted Miss Winteram in packing up the jewels and other valuables indicated by her Ladyship, who likewise dispatched her plate to the house of her banker; and having left her dwelling properly guarded, rewarded with great liberality her rescuers, and given strict orders that John, the coachman, should be very carefully attended, she ascended her carriage, to which were attached four post-horses, because her Ladyship was never drawn by a single pair. Laura was directed to seat herself by the side of her patroness, Miss Winteram in due order followed, and in profound silence the party arrived at their

new

new habitation, whither Dolly and Mrs. Priscilla shortly followed them.

The spirits and hopes of Laura rose when she found herself so near her friends, to whom she ardently wished to communicate her vicinity, whilst she was compelled to await the solemn motions of Lady Betty, whom it would have been indecorous to anticipate in any point; but finding that the good Lady did not appear to think this measure necessary, she recollected that Mrs. Aubrey was to send some articles of apparel for herself to the mansion of Lady Betty on the day following, and availing herself of this *à-propos* circumstance, received in return a commendation for her thoughtfulness, and her Ladyship desired a servant to go immediately to Mrs. Aubrey, and inform her of their altered residence: intelligence which being very much amplified when it reached her, instantly brought Caroline and herself to the house of refuge.

Miss St. Orme embraced Laura with terror and affection, whilst Mrs. Aubrey addressed

addressed to Lady Betty a congratulatory compliment: and her Ladyship then gave a very circumstantial detail of her nocturnal adventure, mingled with some expressions of approbation of the *proper* manner in which the *child* had conducted herself.

Mrs. Aubrey, who discerned with generous satisfaction that Laura was becoming an uncommon favourite, readily acquiesced in the opinion that she had acted with great propriety; and expressing her happiness that the affair had not terminated worse, she recollected that Lady Betty thought it indecorous to lengthen a visit without a positive invitation to do so, and motioned to depart.

Before she left the room, her Ladyship requested that she would call the next morning at ten o'clock, because she wished to converse with her upon some business which had for object the advantage of the child: and Mrs. Aubrey accepted the appointment with pleasure, in the hope that Lady Betty meant to testify her sense of the benefit she believed to have derived from

from the interference of Laura in the moment of danger, by compensating to her in a liberal and ample manner for her loss of the fortune Lord Bellingham had so ill secured to her; whilst Laura herself had a secret hope and wish that this advantage might be a permanent residence with Mrs. Aubrey; and it enabled her to receive the adieus of this amiable woman, and of her younger friend, with less regret. But when she again appeared at the time appointed. the heart of Laura palpitated with a more mixed and less pleasurable emotion.

When she rose to withdraw at the opening of the conference, Lady Betty desired her to remain; but Miss Winteram was dismissed with very little ceremony, and her Ladyship then began.

"Mrs. Aubrey, I have desired the favour of your company, Madam, to consult with you upon a plan I have been digesting the whole of yesterday, to settle this child in the holy state of matrimony; for although, as the Apostle says, it is better to reserve yourself wholly for the service

service of Heaven, yet certainly, in some cases, marriage is an eligible and suitable thing."

Laura felt the blood rush to her cheeks at this exordium, whilst her friend, equally surprised, conquered every appearance of it with some effort, and acknowledged the honour conferred upon her by this pretended consultation.

"This child is well-looking," resumed Lady Betty; "and now I am obliged to remain some time in London, I shall be alarmed every time she approaches the window, lest some young profligate, of which there are abundance, God knows! should see her, and seduce her from the paths of virtue."

Laura was shocked at this blunt declaration; but not observing the indignant suffusion that marked her resentment, Lady Betty proceeded.

"You know, Mrs. Aubrey, that I have great reason to be cautious on that score; therefore I have given the matter much consideration, and have settled it greatly to my own satisfaction.

"So

" So much for *consultation !*" thought Mrs. Aubrey.

" What strange old-fashioned figure has she found out for me !" thought Laura, on her part.

" I know not," continued Lady Betty, " if you recollect to have formerly seen a young man who was a few years back Chaplain to my sister, the Countess of Mertrim."

Mrs. Aubrey bowed ; though in fact at the time mentioned by Lady Betty, she was a child ; but as she conceived her acquiescence to be of little consequence, she would not refuse it.

" Well, Madam, this Clergyman was always a modest, decent, steady man, and very attentive to the duties of his situation in my sister's family ; but he always declared that he considered the Trahernes to be his patrons, in preference to the Mertrims ;—so at the death of the Countess, I procured him a living from my brother George, and he married a very sober discreet woman : and when, in due time, she brought forth a son, he wrote to me, humbly

humbly praying that I would answer for the babe, by proxy, at the font. Well, Madam, I complied, charging the parents to bring him up piously and worthily; and they obeyed my injunction, duly conducting the boy to me for my blessing, whenever business indispensably brought the father to London. And he has always proved himself a grave, attentive, studious, diligent lad; and has now quitted the University, without being contaminated by the idleness, folly, and profane discussion which I am told abound in both those great seminaries. As he has therefore passed a fiery trial, and come forth pure, I don't know where I could better fix my choice for this child, who will then live under the roof of his parents, till they shall teach her due discretion: and I will, from the regard I bear them both, give her a dower, that shall enable them to live with the decency suitable to the boy's profession. I expect his father and him in London every day—I may say every hour; for he was to have been here last week, to be ordained:—and that green silk

silk purse which the child is now netting, I design to contain the present I shall make him upon this great occasion: which, as she now knows, will add a spur to her industry, I suppose."

Scarcely was this long harangue concluded, when one of her Ladyship's own domestics announced the Reverend Mr. Davison and his son, who being very readily admitted, instantly made their appearance.

Laura, in inconceivable vexation, dropped the green silk purse, and Mrs. Aubrey turned with anxious curiosity to behold this pair of elect; when a middle-aged man, with sandy hair, a shining face, keen grey eyes surmounted with light yellow brows, a sharp nose, and thin simpering lips very fast closed, entered first with half-a-dozen bows, so profound that they almost amounted to prostration. Such was Mr. Davison; who, having concluded his own silent salutations, seized his son by the arm, and bringing him with a quick step immediately before Lady Betty, admonished him in a deep solemn tone to kneel

kneel to his most worthy patroness, and truly honourable godmother, for her pious blessing.

The young man, ashamed of performing the prescribed ceremony before the strangers, stood for some moments immoveable, resisting with awkward obstinacy his father's efforts, until the pain of the violent pinches and expostulatory tuggings at his arm at length resolved him, and he dropped upon his knees, exclaiming as he had been wont—"I implore your blessing, my honoured and honourable godmother!" still, however, vainly endeavouring, at the same time to shake off the vindictive gripe of his indignant father.

Shocked as Laura was, she could scarcely forbear laughing; and Mrs. Aubrey bit her lips to prevent the smile that hovered on them.

"Oh fascinating adulation!" she secretly exclaimed, "what a garb hast thou put on to besiege that impenetrable heart!"

During the ceremony of the blessing, she received from Laura a supplicating

glance, to which she replied by another of encouragement; and Lady Betty then introduced them to the Reverend Mr. Davison.

"This gentlewoman," said her Ladyship, "is the wife of Mr. Aubrey, a good and righteous man, and a worthy Minister of the Church of England."

At this notification the elder gentleman knit his brows involuntarily, screwed his lips more firmly, and bowed. Mr. Aubrey now immediately appeared to him in the light of a rival, and by this violent commendation, a very formidable one.

"And this child," continued Lady Betty, "is—is an orphan I take care of, and I believe a very good child."

What, another rival! a rival to his son, the godson, John Traherne Davison!

"This cursed old beldame is growing childish!" thought the worthy man: "after having passed her whole life without one social affection, she is sinking into the weakness of patronizing orphans! Mr. Aubrey, too, the devil take him! But who can the young minx be?"

By

By this time the party were seated with decent composure, and young Davison occupying his chair with unconquerable awkwardness, hung his head in sullen silence; for though he did not dare to rebel in the formidable presence of Lady Betty, he was still angry and confounded at having been compelled to exhibit the farce of the genuflexion to the ladies; nor would his father indeed have hazarded the scene to profane eyes, had he not feared the effect of suddenly appearing to slacken in his zealous devotion, after having rigorously sustained it for so many years; and he regarded Mrs. Aubrey and Laura with a very malicious observation, both as interlopers and interested spies.

Lady Betty now enquired when the youth was to be invested with the holy office of pastor to the Lord's flocks; to which he replied, kicking his heel against the frame of his chair, that he did not know.

His father, aghast at the mutinous insolence of his manner, hastily observed that the ordination would take place with all

due speed and convenience. He then proceeded to expatiate with hallowed ecstacy upon the providential escape of her Ladyship from the hand of the assassin, which when he had heard at her mansion, where his son and himself had been the preceding day, he said it had given him inconceivable agitation lest his honoured patroness should find her precious health injured by the shock: nor were his anxious enquiries silenced until he was fully assured that she had neither cold, rheumatism, gout, nor sciatica.

Mrs. Aubrey, who had an engagement at one o'clock, finding there was not any probability that the gentlemen would quickly depart, was compelled to leave them in possession of the field; and, to the extreme mortification of Laura, announced the necessity of her immediate return to her present home: but ere she left the house, having vainly intimated that she should feel particularly honoured by obtaining the indulgence of her Ladyship's society, she next solicited that of Laura for the next day, who heard the request

request complied with, after a short pause, with exquisite delight.

Lady Betty very soon after hinted to Mr. Davison in terms rather decisive, that he was at liberty to depart; but qualified the dismissal with telling him that she wished to see him the next morning upon business of some importance.

With a very submissive air he bowed compliance in both instances; and after numberless courtesies exceedingly overstrained towards his patroness, and a neglect as marked towards Laura, he withdrew, followed by his hopeful son.

Miss Winteram was then recalled from exile; and to the infinite relief of Laura, nothing further was said upon the subject of her union with Mr. John Traherne Davison.

CHAP. X.

MRS. AUBREY sent the carriage for her impatient guest at an early hour the next morning; but Lady Betty, displeased with the youthful appearance both of the footman and coachman, as she happened to discern them from a window, protested that all discretion was wholly vanishing from the face of the earth; and Laura, trembling at this apostrophe, began to fear she should not be suffered to go to her friend, from the apprehended levity or carelessness of her attendants.

After some difficulty, however, Lady Betty adjusted the matter more to her own satisfaction, by sending with *the child* one of her ancient *laquais*, who mounted the foot-board with great and very

very necessary deliberation, and was nearly jerked from it a moment after, when the driver set off as usual, full speed.

At the fourth turning, as he happened to be an ambitious and daring genius, he seized with avidity an opportunity that presented itself of jockeying another gentleman of the whip; and baulking his turning, swung into the disputed street with so rapid a motion, that the ancient servitor of Lady Betty was unable to retain his station, and was thrown on the pavement, bruised, maimed, and senseless.

The cries of the spectators awakened the attention of Laura, who on discovering the occasion of the alarm, eagerly called to the coachman to stop; and jumping from the carriage almost without assistance, followed the sufferer into a large house near the spot, whither he was taken.

He was speechless; and Laura instantly sending for surgical assistance, entreated that every thing might be done for the poor old man which should be thought necessary. His white hair, his pale furrowed aspect, the groans he unconsciously

uttered, and the idea that in her service he had encountered this unfortunate accident, all conspired to heighten her regrets; and as she contemplated him as he lay upon a couch in a sort of saloon where he had been placed. the tears gushed from her eyes, and she deprecated a dissolution so terribly hastened.

At length imagining that the people around her did not exert themselves properly, she undertook the task of chafing his withered temples; and the drop in either eye stood suspended by anxious hope, when she perceived in the venerable aspect a trace of returning sensation.

"Oh, when," she exclaimed, "will a surgeon arrive! Who has been sent for one?"

Then taking her purse from her pocket, with her eyes still fixed upon the sufferer, she held it out to whoever would receive it, and entreated that another messenger might be dispatched; but the hand and the purse were gently repulsed, and a voice that made her start, repeated the order with equal energy.

"Mr.

"Mr. St. Orme!" exclaimed Laura.

"I beheld the carriage at the door," he replied, "and heard some people round it mention an accident, and such alarming circumstances account for my presence here: but, my dear Miss Delaunie, allow me to conduct you hence; this is a house of public resort, and therefore an improper place for you to appear in, even on so humane an occasion."

"But this poor old man!" said Laura: "who will——"

"I will engage that he is carefully attended," interrupted St. Orme: "consider, my amiable friend——"

"If it is improper to remain, I will go then," said Laura, wiping the tears from her cheek; "but will you condescend to stay here until something effectual is done?"

St. Orme readily promised this, and then led her to the carriage. The crowd had now almost entirely dispersed; and on crossing the foot-way, the eye of Laura encountered the screwd-up aspect of Mr. Davison, who started on observing whence

she came; and raising his spread hand in exceeding horror and astonishment to his inclined face, as if to exclude some dreadful sight, he hastily walked on.

She coloured violently, but would not appear to remark the impertinence of his look and gesture; and St. Orme, who had not observed any part of the pantomime, put her into the carriage, and enjoined the coachman to be careful.

Laura, earnestly thanking him for relieving her mind of part of its anxiety, bade him adieu; but instead of returning the farewell, he informed her that he was happily allowed to be a guest at the table of Mrs. Aubrey, and would bring her a faithful, and he hoped a good report of her patient.

Her cheeks were again suffused at this intelligence; and forgetting the invidious action of Mr. Davison, her mind was now divided between the pleasures of the coming hour and the unlucky incident which she believed could alone have imbittered them.

The reception given to her by Mrs. Aubrey and Caroline, soothed and delighted

delighted her. The countenance and the accents of each demonstrated sincere affection, and the grateful heart of Laura rejected for some moments any other guest than the happiness she derived from the tenderness of their regard; but at length the painful occurrence that had so much affected her, reverted to her imagination, and she was preparing to mention it, when Miss St. Orme exclaimed—

"Cecil dines with us! He would not have pardoned me, I believe, if I had not advertised him of your engagement with us to-day; and I am sure he would have been very much disappointed if our kind Mrs. Aubrey had not invited him to join our party."

"He is very good," replied Laura: "I have already seen him this morning, and am now impatient for his appearance."

She then repeated the accident that had occurred, and the task which had devolved upon St. Orme; and Mrs. Aubrey, very much chagrined, became equally anxious for his report.

In another half hour he relieved their

apprehensions in some degree, by bringing intelligence that the poor old man, though suffering greatly from contusions, did not appear to be very dangerously hurt, and that he would be removed, if possible, to the house of Lord John Traherne in the course of the day. St. Orme added, that he would see him again after dinner.

He had scarcely spoken, when the servant announced Mr. Davison; and the heart of Laura palpitated at the ill-boding sound, which was now become likewise inexpressibly hateful to her ear.

The worthy gentleman entered the room wholly divested of the obsequiousness which had so lately characterized his deportment; and marching up to Mrs. Aubrey, delivered to her in solemn silence an unsealed billet, which she received with evident surprise, and did not read without indignation.

Laura, who earnestly regarded her countenance, changed colour more than once; and Caroline partook of her consternation, for Mrs. Aubrey had imparted to her the scene of the preceding day;

whilst her brother, provoked at the insolent and pedantic manners of the reverend messenger, and having perhaps heard in rotation from Caroline of the intended alliance, felt all the inclination in the word to beat him to a mummy.

"I am more concerned than I can express," said Mrs. Aubrey, after a considerable pause, "at this unexpected revocation of a favour Lady Betty had so kindly and so readily granted me; and I cannot imagine how the unfortunate accident I regret, can have possibly entailed all the mischief her Ladyship apprehends."

"Madam," returned Mr. Davison, "I cannot enter into, or discuss the motives and causes upon which her Ladyship deems it right and expedient to act; I am merely deputed by her Ladyship to conduct that young person immediately to her, for which purpose and effect her Ladyship has sent a carriage belonging to that worthy Nobleman, my Lord John Traherne, in the which I am to guard her home in safety, and quickly."

At

At the conclusion of this sentence, Laura burst into tears.

"This is intolerable!" exclaimed St. Orme: "Mrs. Aubrey, will you not——"

"I must not dispute the will of Lady Betty," interrupted Mrs. Aubrey hastily; "but if Caroline will excuse my absence, I will accompany Miss Delaunie, and endeavour by entreaty and representation to procure this mandate to be recalled, which inflicts so much disappointment and pain upon us all."

"What is this mischief," demanded St. Orme eagerly, "which Lady Betty so much and so suddenly apprehends?"

Mrs. Aubrey perceiving that he was much irritated and enraged, waved a direct reply, by repeating a hope of convincing her Ladyship that her fears were unfounded, and of returning back with her young friend.

Laura entertained not, however, any such hope; for she rightly suspected that the report of the pious Mr. Davison had occasioned her to be recalled, and she feared that the impulse of humanity to which

which she had yielded, though she still could not repent it, would subject her to much mortification, long lectures, and confinement.

Dejected and still weeping, she embraced Caroline, who now appeared to share in the indignation of her brother, and in a mournful tone bade her adieu.

"Support your spirits," whispered St. Orme, "until the return of Mr. Aubrey; he is expected next week with Lord John, and I am sure they will liberate you from this tyranny!"

"Miss, I await your pleasure!" exclaimed Mr. Davison in a supercilious tone.

Laura then turned to St. Orme, who regarding the Divine with a very hostile air, took her hand to lead her to the carriage of the worthy Nobleman, Lord John Traherne, to which Mrs. Aubrey was likewise hastening, to prevent any further impertinence on the one side, or hasty expression on the other, that might aggravate the affair.

"I think," said St. Orme, detaining

Laura

Laura on the stairs, "that I heard Caroline mention to you the expected return of Mr. Aubrey; and let me add, my amiable friend, that I hope you will not suffer that strange old woman to make any undesired change in your destiny, when his interference will so soon relieve you."

"How can I oppose her authority?" replied Laura, not comprehending immediately the force of this adjuration. "I am doomed," she added, with a fresh gush of tears, "to all the misery of dependance, and ever uncertain of my future fate, to endure alternately every evil attached to it!"

"Not so," returned St. Orme, in accents of tenderness; "you have friends, dearest Laura, zealous, and wholly attached to you, who would——"

"Miss," cried the voice of Lady Betty's ambassador, "I beg and desire you will descend instantly!—Her Ladyship will suppose I am tardy and dilatory in executing her honoured commands."

Laura immediately obeyed the summons, and St. Orme accompanying her, and beholding

beholding Mr. Davison standing with an impatient aspect in the door way, unable to command his antipathy an resentment, passed him with so little circumspection, that the shoulder of the officious Divine received a very ungentle shock from one of the pilasters; and he had some difficulty in preventing himself from descending the steps with as much celerity as he could possibly desire.

He looked at the offender with a most malicious aspect; but fearful of provoking a further aggression, received the insult with silence and christianly humility; and St. Orme placing Laura in the carriage, entreated Mrs. Aubrey to bring her back.

"I need not conjure you to be eloquent," he added; "yet do, if possible, surpass yourself, and let us not have vainly indulged in the prospect of a happiness so cruelly snatched from us!"

He then withdrew, that Mr Davison without further delay might gratify his ambition of riding in the worthy Lord John's carriage; and so delighted was the reverend

reverend gentleman with the short-lived distinction, that he forgot the pain of his bruised shoulder ; and, spite of his efforts to the contrary, simpered from excess of complacent delight, and placing his shining face in the centre of the opened window, offered himself very kindly to the regards of those who passed.

Mrs. Aubrey, meantime, taking the hand of Laura, which she affectionately pressed, repeated in a low tone the intimation of Miss St. Orme, that Lord John and her husband were certainly returning in a week or ten days, and accompanied the information with a hint to repel with gentleness and perseverance the absurd design of the marriage with young Davison.

At length Mr. Davison was compelled to descend from his local elevation ; and assuming a mien much less dignified to enter the presence of his right honourable patroness, he yet retained more than his accustomed assurance, from the conscious pride of having acted in the double capacity of informer and plenipotentiary.

Laura,

Laura, trembling and dejected, followed Mrs. Aubrey with a lingering step; and when they appeared, Lady Betty, whose aspect announced her dissatisfaction, thanked the Lord that the unlucky child was once more safe under the same roof with herself—"from whence," she added, "she shall not again stir, but to be disposed of in holy wedlock."

At this awful fiat, the head of Laura drooped, and she sighed.

"I am very sorry to hear such a determination," said Mrs. Aubrey, "because I hoped to explain to your Ladyship any misapprehended circumstance that may have happened, and to have yet obtained the society of my young friend for the day."

"No," interrupted Lady Betty, "no! Heaven be praised that she is again safe under my protection! I shall not consent to lose sight of the child now, until I am certain that she will be well taken care of by a sober, staid, grave, and sedate husband. She is very young to be sure; but you know, Mrs. Aubrey, that I have good

good cause to be apprehensive, and I find to my cost that there is hardly trusting any one! The folly of people who ought to know better, provokes my wrath! Who but children and idiots would confide the care of their limbs and their lives to a mad-headed boy, with less sense and discretion than the animals he drives!—And that you, whom I believed to be a prudent woman, should hire a young lad for a coachman—a careless, giddy lad!—I really expect, upon the word of a reasonable being, that in a few years we shall see Bishops and Judges conducting those silly machines which I believe are called curricles, full speed through the streets of this vicious town, without exciting any other sensation than admiration and applause!"

"I am excessively concerned," said Mrs. Aubrey, "to have incurred the censure of your Ladyship——"

"My censure!" interrupted Lady Betty, the tip of her nose deepening every moment in colour; "how can I refrain from censure when I hear from the worthy Mr. Davison

Davison that the child had been in a coffee-house, a tavern, a bad, naughty house for aught I know? Fie! fie! No, indeed, she shall not stir from my elbow till she is safe and secure from seduction and the pursuits of vile libertines! I have been consulting the worthy Mr. Davison, and he is very thankful to enter into my views——"

"Hem!—hem!—certainly," said the Divine hastily, "to oblige your Ladyship, my son shall espouse the young gentlewoman; and the dower, as your Ladyship I think observed, you will take into consideration?"

"Yes; I mean to give the child five thousand pounds," returned Lady Betty.

"Five thousand pounds!" repeated the father, bowing very low: "I will seek my son this morning, and——"

"And for the boy," resumed Lady Betty, "I shall in due time procure a living."

"A living!—five thousand pounds! I will seek him this very minute!"

"Do so," returned her Ladyship, "for I am

I am resolved the marriage shall take place in a few days."

Laura trembled.

"So soon, Madam!" exclaimed Mrs. Aubrey, in some dismay; "would not your Ladyship rather chuse to defer so important an affair until the return of my Lord John, especially as his Lordship is so shortly expected?"

"Mrs. Aubrey," replied Lady Betty, rather drily, "I am the best judge of what I would rather chuse; and I would rather chuse to see this child, whom I regard, the wife of an honest man, than the Miss of a Nobleman. I have suffered enough, you well know.—Who was that young showy libertine, child, who was with you, it seems, in the wicked house?"

Laura made an ineffectual effort to reply; and Mrs. Aubrey explained that Mr. St. Orme was accidentally passing, and offered his assistance and good offices.

"Good offices!—Well, Mr. St. Orme," resumed the ancient female censor, "may be rather better than his fellows, for aught I know, and he may be

to

to the full as bad; so the child shall see no more of him."

Mrs. Aubrey, who had too much sense to be personally offended at the whims of her sage Ladyship, finding that nothing could be done in mitigation of the sentence already passed, and recollecting that it was foreign post-day, very wisely resolved to return home immediately, and write to her husband an account of the intended nuptials, subjoining the characters of the bridegroom and his honoured papa; in the expectation that the hastened return of the travellers might defeat the plan of the good lady, and the hopes of the worthy Mr. Davison.

Laura saw her depart with increased sadness; and unable to controul her emotions, abruptly left the room, and fled almost in despair, to weep without restraint in her own apartment, where for the present she was suffered to remain in peace; as Lady Betty had been advertised that the unfortunate Marchioness of Bellingham, after having lingered in great apparent agony, had died the preceding evening; and she

was

was furbishing up her mourning suits, because she could not endure that any one having borne that title, and having produced an heir to the family, should not be treated with proper decorum and respect when she died!

Laura, who did not know that the Marchioness had survived her desperate action, believed that her previous conduct had prevented Lady Betty from paying any tribute of respect to her memory; but Dolly, who soon learned the news from the household of Lord John, undeceived her; and Laura gave another tear to the hapless destiny of a woman once so idolized by that world, to whom her last moments presented so serious a lesson.

"Lady Ronald," Dolly added, "was going to wreck and ruin as fast as possible, and nobody pitied her, or her mother, who was very ill as she pretended, and going to Lisbon; but folks said it was only because nobody would look upon her here. And now, Ma'am," continued the talkative Mrs. Maunder, "I will tell you a piece of good news—I calls it good news, because

because you are so fond of the young Lord and Lady—— do you know that her comical old Ladyship would never look upon the poor little dears, nor let 'em come anigh her while Lady Bellingham was alive; and now all of a sudden they are to be brought here, they say to-morrow or next day—and so you'll see 'em, Ma'am. But dear me, now I think of it, what was the reason that you was sent for back in such a hurry?—To be sure, when they told me of it, I thought you must be hurt, Ma'am, as well as poor old Anthony, but they said you wasn't: and I assure you, Miss Laura, we are all very sorry you didn't get your holiday as I know you set so much store by—they says, they suppose that Parson is at the bottom on't, by his being so busy!—Lauk, Ma'am, how they do all hate him!"

Laura was not at all surprised at this circumstance; but she passed by the remark of Mrs. Maunder, by dwelling with satisfaction unfeigned upon her approaching interview with the children; and

waving a reply to her enquiry into the occasion of her prompt return, anxiously asked how the poor old servant was; and Dolly, after enlarging upon his mishap, concluded her animadversions by asserting that he was surprisingly well, considering.

She was much pleased with this favourable report; and then recollecting her promise to Mrs. Forster, desired her attendant to take an opportunity of calling at her house, to inform her of the removal of Lady Betty, and to intimate at what hour she might find her young Lady in her apartment.

She then dismissed Dolly as soon as possible, to ruminate at her ease upon her fears, her doubts, her hopes, and her alarms.

The threatened marriage did not in itself so much appal her, because she did not intend to submit to so absurd a sacrifice: but she dreaded the shock of opposing to the decided and undoubted authority assumed by her Ladyship, the necessary firmness of denial that could alone

avail her; and that Lord John might then, spite of the influence of Mr. Aubrey, be prejudiced by his sister to withdraw his favour. The friendship of the kind Aubreys, however soothing, could not in that case raise her from the dependant poverty, which she dreaded as a barrier to the flattering hopes which the looks, the manner, and expressions of St. Orme had concurred to awaken in her bosom.

CHAP. XI.

HER reverie lasted until she was summoned to the dinner table; and sighing at the different society she hoped to have sat down with, she hastened perforce to that of Lady Betty and Miss Winteram, who always had the honour of being of the party when there was not company.

This good virgin had now a double portion of primness in her shrivelled aspect; and all the respect she so amply demonstrated for her patroness, could scarcely induce her to preserve a show of civility to Laura, whom she considered at this moment in the odious light of a doubly successful rival; for the pious Mr. Davison, to retain an advocate for himself and his son near the person of Lady Betty, and thinking likewise that Miss Winteram must, to use his own expression, have had pretty pickings in the course of nineteen years, besides a handsome legacy which she had a right to expect, had hinted to her in terms not to be misunderstood, that he hoped she was reserving her fair hand for John Traherne, who, young as he was, was yet sensible of the merits of a certain amiable lady he should not name.

So that the poor Winteram, who looked forward to this agreeable emancipation from her slavery as quite indubitable, felt all the horrors of rage, jealousy, and despair, when the intended nuptials were announced to her by Lady Betty; who, far

far from suspecting this lamentable circumstance, would have inevitably overwhelmed the forsaken lady with her ireful indignation for her folly and presumption, had it met her knowledge.

As the same happy ignorance extended to Laura, she did not observe the hostile regards of Miss Winteram, but in silent abstraction, which Lady Betty secretly applauded as a decent sobriety of manner, passed the remainder of the tedious day.

When she withdrew for the night, Dolly, who eagerly awaited her in her apartment, scarcely shut the door before she exclaimed, with a mingled emotion of astonishment, curiosity, and anger—

"Why, Miss Laura, Ma'am, if I an't all amort at the thoughts on't!—Why, is it true, Ma'am, that her Ladyship can go to contrive such an out-of-the-way thing as for to marry you to such a——well, I do wonder what the good-for-nothing old——God forgive me!—Why, Miss Laura, is it true, Ma'am?"

"Do not mention it to me, Dolly!" returned her young Lady, sickening at

the enquiry; "I know not what they will do with me!"

"I'll be hanged," resumed the *suivante*, "if the old woman, with her airs and her whims, is fit to live with Christian folks! Why, Ma'am, you would not go for to humour such a freak as this!—I'd see her neck as long as my arm first!"

"I entreat that you do not speak of Lady Betty with disrespect!" said Laura, with an aspect of imposing gravity.

"Well then, if I must bite my tongue, I must!" returned Mrs. Maunder; "but I han't patience to think on't, and that's the truth!"

With some difficulty, Laura at length succeeded in moderating her indiscreet zeal: but poor Dolly was far from being satisfied with the apparent indulgence her young Lady exhibited for the authority of Lady Betty, against whom she had conceived as powerful an antipathy as she had experienced to the Dowager Countess of Melville.

The next morning at an early hour she awakened Laura, who, having kept an involuntary

involuntary vigil, had just sunk into a slumber, with the pleasing intelligence of having received a letter for her from a young woman, who would only deliver it into the hand of Mrs. Maunder; and privately informing her that she was sent by Miss St. Orme, desired to know if she was to call in the evening for an answer.

"Where is the letter?" asked Laura, eagerly: "yes, yes—run, good Dolly, before the young woman can be questioned, and beg her to call in the evening."

Away flew Mrs. Maunder; and Laura then eagerly breaking the seal, observed another letter in the envelope, the address of which was written in a well-remembered hand. Her heart beat violently; but she nevertheless repressed its emotions, and immediately read the communication of Caroline.

"Will my Laura forgive me," said this amiable girl, "for intruding

upon her not only my own regrets for her present subjection, but those of another, whose entreaties to be allowed to employ my name for the conveyance of his sentiments I could not resist, not only because I suspect them to be exactly what I have long wished, but because this plan will be more consonant with your ideas of propriety, as we are compelled to make your woman a party in it? I must not enlarge upon my expectations and my hopes, because the enclosed ought to be delivered to you as early as possible to-morrow, for the greater security. Adieu, dearest Laura! you can amply console me for my disappointment of to-day.

"CAROLINE ST. ORME."

This preparative billet confirmed her anxious surmises upon the purport of the other; and with increasing emotion she tore it open.

"The

"The scenes of this morning," wrote St. Orme, "still occupy my imagination, nor can succeeding ones ever banish them thence:—I still behold you, most amiable and lovely, chafing with earnest care and irresistible tenderness the aged temples of the poor sufferer!—and how was this gentle humanity rewarded? I find my patience and forbearance wholly subdued, when fancy retraces you shedding tears extorted by the insolent cold-hearted tyranny of a being——I will not, however, further wound your feelings. You said, and can I forget it? that you were doomed to experience perpetual uncertainty for your future fate!—You must then be doomed to this by your own choice; and I now entreat you to a decision that in giving a colouring to your destiny, will likewise fix that of a man, who once doubted, but is now assured of the sincerity and ingenuousness of that character, which he only thought too amiable in semblance to have been preserved genuine and

pure, in a school from which it was almost impossible it should have escaped uncontaminated.

"In avowing these doubts, I will, however, venture to plead the illusion of concurring circumstances, and that restless interest which, inducing me to seek perpetually for proofs either to destroy or confirm suspicions that gave me the most tormenting inquietude, only plunged me into new error by the waywardness of my destiny, and the critical situations in which I beheld you—situations resulting from an unfortunate chain of accidental circumstances, not from the imprudence and levity I rashly suspected.

"I sent to you whilst you were yet at the house of Mrs. Meedon, some intimation of the characters of Lady Mary Mornay, her father, and Mrs. Bergarde through the medium of Nevarc; but unfortunately you rejected the paper, which likewise contained a hint of the meditated journey of Mrs Aubrey, because he had not an opportunity of informing you that it was the communication of a friend: and very shortly

shortly after, I believed that my interference or representation would have been impertinent, both from the general report of the world, and from circumstances I had an opportunity of observing. Nevarc judged otherwise; and by pretending a *penchant* where the deception could not be any injury to the deceived, he obtained a confirmation of his opinion: yet you had readily accepted the protection of Lady Melville, and appeared to have neglected our Adwan friend.

"Thus much for palliatives—and I offer them with the more hope of an explicit pardon, which I shall be uneasy until I obtain, because I am sensible they are aided by the sweetness of your disposition, and by the complacency of that artless innocence and candour my suspicions outraged. Confirm the partial forgiveness I have already received, beloved Laura; and then let me conjure you, for my peace as well as your own, not to suffer the stupid and senseless plan of Lady Betty to take effect.

"Our mutual friend has this day

written to her husband in a manner that will certainly hasten the return of Lord John. I will not seek to draw from you any concession until I have made Mr. Aubrey the depositary of my sentiments—a confidence due to him on your account as well as mine, and which my gratitude and regard for him impose. You alone, my amiable Laura, can prevent this communication by telling me that I can only grieve him by the knowledge of a disappointed attachment;—this is what I most deprecate, though I must ever remain your devoted

"CECIL ST. ORME."

Laura employed so much time in reading this letter, that Dolly, who wondered why her young Lady, who was a scholard, did not read it off hand, was at length compelled to interrupt her studies by a hint that Lady Betty would probably expect her soon to breakfast.

This intimation rapidly dispelled the clouds

clouds into which she had mounted, and again placed her suddenly upon this vulgar globe, so overrun with cares, griefs, and vexations.

"Yes, my good Dolly," she replied, with mingled confusion and complacency, "I must hasten.——At what hour did you say the young woman was to return in the evening?"

"Lord, if here isn't Mrs. Priscilla come to call you!" exclaimed Dolly; "I know her stalking step."

Laura now redoubled her expedition; but the moment Mrs. Priscilla had departed, she renewed her enquiry; and having received the information she demanded, began forming plans to obtain in the course of the day a retired hour, to reply to her kind Caroline, and give St. Orme the requested acknowledgment of an unreserved forgiveness:—to say any thing further, she thought it would be impossible to find time for, and his intimation of applying to Mr. Aubrey must therefore remain unnoticed. Her only concern upon the subject arose from her own

own poverty and dependance: but this concern was not wholly unrelieved by a hope that Lord John and even Lady Betty would not oppose an establishment so honourable to her; and that with their approbation they might render it less objectionable to the father of St. Orme.

She found Lady Betty in a very ill-humour, which she immediately attributed to her own want of punctuality in attending her *déjeuné*; but soon after, discovered that it arose from the necessity she found herself in, of being present at the examination of the unhappy wretches by whom her property and her life had been endangered.

On hearing this circumstance, Laura secretly congratulated herself that she should not then have any obstacle to the employment she meditated; but, to her unspeakable mortification and affright, she was desired, after breakfast was concluded, to equip herself in decent and grave attire, to accompany her patroness, who was likewise attended by Miss Winteram and Priscilla.

Disappointed

Disappointed in her hope, and shocked at the idea of the business in which she was thus compelled to be a party, she followed Lady Betty to the carriage, and with anxiety, dread, and horror reverted to the scene upon which she abhorred to think.

The presence of Lady Betty had been required from some circumstance relative to the young man she had employed as her coachman, who was at length entirely acquitted; it appearing that he had merely acted with indiscretion, by mentioning at the public-house, in the presence of strangers, that the old lady he was then serving, had a room brimful of plate to his knowledge; and he had heard the old servants say that she abounded in jewels and other fine things in the bargain.

One of the depredators happened to be present at this detail, to which he attentively listened; and by artful interrogations, obtained of the unconscious babbler the number and state of the household, and every other information that might aid his design, which he immediately communicated

municated to four of his associates, and they lost no time in executing it.

But the appearance of Laura, who had become an inmate of the house after the communication of the young man, alarmed and disconcerted the miscreant party; and the fellow who had been appointed sentinel, thought she must be a ghost, and was confirmed in the supposition, when the white figure flying down the stairs appeared to his appalled senses to sink into the floor. His confederates, who surrounded Lady Betty, beholding her sudden approach without any intimation from the scout she must have passed, were confounded; and the scene ensued in which Laura had taken so considerable a part.

During the examination, Lady Betty was fully confirmed in the idea that the *child* had preserved her from the effect of their rage and disappointment when they found their plan circumvented, and themselves in danger of being seized: and regarding Laura as they proceeded homewards with secret complacency, she resolved

resolved to bestow upon her double the portion she had originally destined, rather than not immediately place her in fancied security, beyond the reach of Lord Glendarvon and other sad reprobate wretches, by marrying her instantly to her godson, and sending her with him and his worthy and pious father, into the country.

Her Ladyship was informed when she reached the house of her brother, that Lord Traherne and Lady Emily were already there: and Laura on hearing this, would have given all she possessed to have darted by her up the stairs, and have flown to embrace the little deserted, motherless pair: but Lady Betty, who was far from being actuated by such ardent affection, proceeded with her usual dignified pace, and almost gave poor Laura a fever by the vehemence of her repressed impatience.

And when at length they entered the apartment where the children were awaiting the approach of their aunt, she was shocked at the appearance of the boy, whose violent, haughty, yet generous spirit

was

was evidently subdued, and had given place to the sullenness of impotent resentment, and the apathy of despair:—he was much thinner, but his whole countenance was overspread with an unhealthy flush; and Laura, no longer recollecting any prescribed decorum, rushed past Lady Betty, and taking him in her arms, pressed her lips to his burning cheek, and moistened it with her tears.

The child, who had not expected to see her, received her caresses for a moment in stupid silence; and then, softened by her tenderness and affection, hung round her neck, and cried bitterly.

Lady Betty, whose heart, however callous in general, was still human, again thought she had caught cold, and forgot to reprimand either the indiscreet and absurd emotions of Laura, or the strange blubbering of the boy. Unwilling, however, to display a weakness so new to her, she walked to the upper end of the room, and seating herself gravely, called Lord Traherne towards her; who very reluctantly quitted the arms that so kindly encircled

encircled him, to receive the formal and undesired salute of his good aunt.

Little Emily, who was a very secondary object with her Ladyship, then advanced to replace him in the attention of Laura, and was received with equal fondness, which was still further increased when the child whispered to her not to tell Mrs. Morrice that William had cried.—"He is good now," added she; "he will not cry any more!"

Laura readily acceded to this request; and then recollecting herself, led the little girl to Lady Betty, who very coolly kissed her, and asked in an austere voice if her governess had never taught her to make a curtsy.

The child thus reprimanded, turned to Laura for protection; and at the same moment Lord Traherne, impatient of being detained from her, quitted the chair upon which he had been desired to seat himself, and again clasping his arms round her neck, begged her earnestly that she would not let him be taken from her.

"This

"This is very strange!" muttered Lady Betty, offended at so marked a preference.

"Oh Madam," exclaimed Laura, without observing her displeasure, "this dear boy is very feverish!"

"Dear boy!" repeated her Ladyship, with a tremendous aspect; "are you speaking of my Lord Traherne, Miss?"

"Lord Traherne, Madam," resumed Laura, still occupied by her alarm, "is, I fear, much indisposed!"

Apprehensive of danger to a life so important, this rigid formalist having examined into the symptoms already discerned by the quickened eye of affection, dispatched a servant instantly for the family physician, whose testimony confirmed the fears of Laura; and Lady Betty, without a moment of hesitation, ordered out the carriage that had conveyed him to town, that he might be immediately taken home, and properly nursed by his own attendants: intending however to overlook their conduct with scrupulous care, by visiting them herself every other day, and sending in

in the intervening ones a confidential inspector.

But as this very tender project was unknown to Laura, who could not indeed have been much consoled by learning it, she was extremely unhappy that the little invalid was thus pitilessly committed to the discretion of servants: and when the carriage was announced, she was on the point of entreating that she might be suffered to accompany him, when Lord Traherne prevented the execution of her purpose, by clinging to her with violent outcries, and protesting he would not go.

Representation and remonstrance were useless, for he heard them not; and the vehemence of his emotion, joined to the disordered state of his blood, produced a suffocation very alarming.

"I will not leave you!" exclaimed Laura, with terrified eagerness; "I will accompany you, my dear, dear William!"

Lady Betty herself confirmed this promise; but it was some time ere he could be made sensible of its import: and when he recovered his breath and recollection, her

her Ladyship, to prevent a relapse, renewed her permission that Laura should attend him; at the same time sending to Dolly to put up the *child's* night-clothes and a change of garments—an order that produced an enquiry on the part of Mrs. Maunder if she was going out of town with her young Lady; and after some hesitation Lady Betty assented.

Wholly occupied by her beloved charge, Laura forgot until they had quitted London, and were almost arrived at the villa to which Lord Traherne and his sister had been removed, that in the evening the messenger of Miss St. Orme would call for her expected answer: and though the recollection of this circumstance harassed and tormented her, yet she could not much regret even the disappointment she imagined St. Orme would experience, when she contemplated the heavy eye, and heard the laboured respiration of her little brother, who was still satisfied and pleased with her presence and her endearments.

On reaching his home, he would not be put

put to bed until he was assured that she would sit by him: and his next petition, which he preferred with an eagerness not to be safely refused to him, excluded Mrs. Morrice, his sister's governess, and Mr. Bancroft, his own tutor, entirely from his apartment, which he could not endure that Laura should quit for a moment, lest she should likewise leave the house. The natural violence of his disposition, which had been tyrannically and improperly curbed, now evidenced itself in transports of rage and indignation whenever the voice of Mrs. Morrice was heard at the door, or the enquiries of his equally obnoxious tutor were transmitted in his hearing.

Laura was surprised and shocked at an antipathy so uncommonly strong, and sought to discover the reason of it from Mr. Bancroft, who of the two appeared, she thought, the more likely to inform her with the least variation from the truth: and she then discovered from his intelligence that the unfortunate Marchioness had made an effort to see her children the day before she committed the desperate action

action of which she had died; but that Mrs. Morrice, as well as himself, having received particular instructions not to suffer any communication between them, Lady Bellingham had failed in her project; yet still persevering in her wishes, she had surprised Mrs. Morrice when she was walking in the grounds, and Lord Traherne unluckily running up at the moment, had discovered his mother kneeling to her, and in tears; that he instantly flew into the arms of her Ladyship, and they were obliged to be at length separated by violence.

Laura, who could well imagine from the countenance and manners of Mrs. Morrice and the tutor, who had each been chosen to their office by the recommendation of some great Lady, or some mighty Lord, with little *collateral* recommendation from their own merits, that this scene was not conducted by them either with much delicacy or compassion, no longer experienced any astonishment at the abhorrence of the child, especially as she soon learned from the never-failing tongue of Dolly

Dolly, that Lord Traherne had been repeatedly punished for the invectives his rage had extorted from him at the moment, and for his sullen obstinacy ever since—intelligence which one of the servants very eagerly communicated, with a comment of how hard it was that children might not be suffered to like their own mother.

CHAP. XII.

FROM this moment the affection and interest Laura had ever experienced for him, redoubled; she watched by his bedside the whole night, lulled him to his broken slumbers in her arms, tasted his medicines, and procured them to be swallowed by the little patient, by the ever required and ever repeated assurance of loving him dearly, and not leaving him.

Lady Betty had satisfied her ideas of propriety by calling the next day; and at her own request, Mrs. Aubrey was appointed inspectress on the following one. She would not allow Miss St. Orme to accompany her, from an apprehension of conducting her to the vicinity of a disease that might perhaps be contagious; but Mrs. Aubrey could not prevent Cecil from meeting her *en route*, and escorting her to the house, though he were not permitted to enter it.

Laura was pleasingly surprised at her unexpected appearance; but Mrs. Aubrey was grieved to observe the change that anxiety and perpetual watching had made in her. After the kindest greeting, and a mention of all the tender remembrances with which she was charged, this amiable woman instantly resolved to relieve her for that night; and writing a billet to Lady Betty, and another to Caroline, she sent them to town with the carriage, and Laura felt herself already revived by her friendly attentions.

Another physician had been called in by

by the first, but they awaited the crisis of the disorder to pronounce upon its termination; and Laura, fearful and solicitous, was every moment called upon by the beloved sufferer for some liquid to relieve his thirst, which he would not suffer any other person to present to him, or for a caress to abate the pain in his head; and if for a single moment she quitted him, the whole apartment was filled with his frantic cries, and for some hours after he would refuse to remain in his bed, unless he held her by the hand.

He was at intervals delirious; but he recognised Mrs. Aubrey, and was not displeased with her presence when he was assured she did not come to take away his Laura; yet relapsing soon after into a rambling vein, he called her his mamma, and conjured her with agonized earnestness to rise, and not kneel to such an ugly, ill-tempered, nasty woman! Then shrieking with violence, he apostrophized Mr. Bancroft as though he had been dragging the unhappy Marchioness from him.

Laura weeping with bitterness, related

to her friend the unfortunate circumstance to which his imagination thus wandered, and the reason she had to suppose that his malady was the immediate effect of it; and Mrs. Aubrey sighing at the recital, exclaimed—

"Oh Lady Melville, could conscience give to you, even in its faintest colours, this scene, where would be the superior reason of which you have so proudly boasted!"

Perceiving that the anxiety of Laura harassed her equally with her personal fatigue, and that she was strongly affected by the one and the other, Mrs. Aubrey finding that she would not be persuaded to quit the chamber of Lord Traherne, to take even half an hour of repose, ordered thither a sofa-bed for her use, meaning to watch herself by the side of the child. But this precaution was of little avail; for when Laura was compelled by her friend to lie down, he started up every other moment to assure himself that she was not gone away; and she then gave up every idea of alleviating her fatigue, which she resolved

to endure until her strength entirely failed her.

On the fifth day, the danger of the little patient increased to an almost hopeless degree. Mrs. Aubrey not being able to prevail upon herself to leave the house, wrote to a female friend in town, to entreat that she would sanction the situation of Miss St. Orme, by residing with her until her return; and Lady Betty now thought it right to remain with the hapless child until his fate was decided.

Express after express were dispatched both to Lord John and the Marquis; but a sufficient interval had not yet elapsed to admit of their arrival in England. Physicians and nurses were multiplied round the sufferer; but though wholly delirious, Lord Traherne still recognised the voice of Laura, and would attend only to her entreaties.

Yet all her cares, her tears, her prayers to Heaven were unavailing; and at the very moment Lord John and Mr. Aubrey reached the mansion, he was expiring in her arms! Her attachment to him sup-

ported her failing strength until he had breathed his last sigh, and Laura then sunk almost equally senseless beside the beloved corse.

At this moment Lord John entered the apartment, where were also his sister and Mrs. Aubrey. The heart of Lady Betty had been powerfully moved by the patience, the tender perseverance, and anxious affection of Laura; and though she was much shocked at the death of Lord Traherne, the immediate heir to the family honours, yet the situation of Laura, whom she believed to be exhausted beyond the power of renovation, affected her still more.

"Brother John," said she, pointing to the bed on which they were extended, "the boy is dead!—and that good child has dug her own grave in fruitless endeavours to preserve him from his! But God's will be done!"

Yet notwithstanding this resigned ejaculation, the tears stole down her wrinkled face, and she experienced, almost for the

first

first time, the bitterness of losing for ever an object endeared and esteemed.

But her apprehensions for this wonderful favourite were fortunately beyond the occasion; for Laura was not then doomed to the grave her friends so much deprecated, though her days were endangered by her overstrained exertions, and the perturbation of her mind.

For some time after the event that released her from her painful attendance, she was scarcely conscious of her existence; but at length, after a refreshing slumber of considerable duration, she awoke, and beheld Mrs. Aubrey near her.

After gazing at her kind friend a few moments in silence—"Tell me, dearest Madam," said she, in a faint voice, "are my cruel apprehensions just? That dear child—is he indeed no more?"

"His doom was inevitable, my sweet Laura," returned Mrs. Aubrey calmly, "since not even your unwearied and tender cares could save him; but you have obtained the confirmed esteem, affection,

and gratitude of every one who was interested in the existence of Lord Traherne, and you must exert yourself to console those who, with equal affliction to combat, have not the same alleviating recollections which should dispel the bitterness of your grief."

Laura wept, but her tears rather relieved than injured her; and ere she could long indulge them, Caroline St. Orme entered her apartment with a cautious step. Every painful retrospect faded before the satisfaction of beholding her young friend, who was equally delighted with her convalescence, which was in two days so well confirmed by her attentions and those of Mrs. Aubrey, that Laura was able to quit her chamber.

On the following one the body of Lord Traherne was to be committed to the tomb of his ancestors; and until this last ceremony was performed, however highly Laura might be considered by the family, as they had quitted the house, she could not be personally noticed: but the good Mr. Aubrey who called generally twice in the

the day, had now the pleasure of conveying to Lord John and his sister a statement of her improving health.

The Marquis of Bellingham, who had likewise returned to England, proved the interest he took in her re-establishment, by the frequency and anxiety of his enquiries; and Caroline St. Orme, who was perpetually receiving billets from her brother, to which she was always compelled to send a written answer, constantly whispered something in the ear of the invalid which very much confirmed the soothing suggestion, that there were people in the world to whom her health and welfare were not entirely indifferent.

Yet, spite of hope and pleasing expectation, Laura still regretted severely that her recent cares had been so fruitless; and when a visit from Lady Betty and her brother was announced to her for the next day, she comprehended from the circumstance that every melancholy ceremonial was past, relating to the little departed being she had so much loved; and burst-

ing into tears, exclaimed—"My poor little William!"

To dissipate the impression of this idea, Mrs. Aubrey entered into a discussion of the vexations and disappointments of the *worthy* Mr. Davison, her intended father-in-law, whose son it appeared had encountered in London some of his College associates: one of whom was a Socinian, a second a confirmed Methodist, and a third, who had already subscribed to the thirty-nine articles to obtain possession of a benefice, had cavilled and argued in behalf of the established Church, so long and so devoutly against every individual of the particular hall of which he had been a member, that he at length found himself a very zealous Arian:—however, his conscience became troublesome after the ceremony of induction; and he reprobated his base complaisance to the will of his friends in private to his confidential intimates, amongst whom young Davison was ranked, because he had proved himself a true theological wrangler; and he advised him and them with great earnestness

ness never to follow his example in this respect, and sully their principles, their honour, and independent sentiments.

To this College triumvirate the hopeful youth immediately imparted the intentions of his patroness, when he had heard them from the mouth of his joyful father; and the divan having deliberated and disputed upon the motives of the old woman's whimsical hurry at length agreed (for a miracle) that they must be of a very potent and pressing nature. So the Arian advised him not to be put off with a paltry five thousand pounds, and a living, for the possession of which he must *sully* his principles; but insist upon twenty or thirty thousand, and a good sinecure place under Government.

The Methodist approved of the idea of demanding a large portion, as some compensation for the vanities and worldly follies which the girl would bring into his house; but the Government, he said, was so impure and abominable, that nothing less than damnation could be the portion

of any one who took any share in its corruption.

In fine, when the argument had been properly and logically discussed, Mr. Traherne Davison, who possessed all the conceit of a young pedant, agreed with the Socinian that the girl was certainly either desperately in love with him, or that the old woman was enraptured with the fame he had acquired as a disputant in the schools; and he not only rejected the proffered benefit with extreme disdain, unless it should be enlarged to meet his expectations, but likewise refused, *from motives of conscience*, to adopt those functions for which his thunderstruck father had endeavoured to *qualify* him, by sending him to College at an expence almost beyond his power of supporting.

The unfortunate Mr. Davison made an effort to conceal this madness from the godmamma; but, alas! the Collegians, who possessed more credit with the son than his father could expect, because he had never been a member of a University,

counselled

counselled the youth to prove to Lady Betty by sound argument, and reasoning at once brilliant and indisputable, that he ought not by any means to accede to her plan without a *douceur*, which they pronounced and spelt *dow-sure*, of twenty or thirty thousand pounds.

Delighted with his importance, Master Traherne wrote as his friends dictated, and received an answer from Lady Betty, whilst he was commenting with his advisers, upon the folly of modern Governments, when compared with those of ancient Greece and Rome.

He opened the billet, for it was too diminutive to be denominated a letter, and perceived in it the following words :—

" Boy ! you are an impudent and silly coxcomb ; and you are commanded never again to presume to enter the presence of Lady Betty Traherne !"

Laura

Laura was well pleased to be freed from the irksome disgust that accompanied only in idea this strange suitor; but she could not rejoice in his disgrace, of which she believed herself to be the cause: and spite of the merriment and exultation of Caroline, who laughed exceedingly at the discomfiture of the gentle youth, she secretly resolved to entreat of Mr. Aubrey to intercede with Lady Betty to restore him at least to the consideration he had enjoyed before his luckless error.

But when Laura found an opportunity of urging this request to the good man, he extinguished her hopes of success, by representing that the discernment and judgment of her Ladyship had been so much discredited in the affair, that he had not any idea of prevailing upon her to forgive either the son or the father, who was equally involved, he said, in the disgrace; nor indeed did he think from the general character of the men, that they merited the effort Laura was so anxious to make, to reinstate them in the good opinion of

Lady

Lady Betty; yet at her reiterated suit, he at length promised to mention her wish.

The next morning Laura exerted all her returning strength to receive properly the honour conferred upon her by Lord John and his sister, whose presence, however, gave her much emotion.

Lady Betty saluted her with kindness, giving her the distinguished appellation of "good child;" and her brother embraced her with an affection truly paternal.

He was considerably altered since Laura had last seen him, and she was shocked to observe how much thinner and more feeble he appeared; his features had lost their sternness, and the furrows of grief and anxiety had replaced those of dignified severity in his countenance. Though Laura had mourned for his sorrows, she was not displeased with this effect of them, since she could now, without the fear of being checked for presumption, venture to betray the sensations of gratitude and respectful affection he inspired.

Lord John informed her that the Marquis was very desirous of seeing her; and

if

if she found herself sufficiently recovered to return to his house the next day, where Lady Betty would be happy to receive her, it would spare Lord Bellingham the melancholy task of immediately visiting a place he could not yet behold without great anguish and emotion.

Animated by such a motive, Laura readily gave an affirming answer; nor did it instantly occur to her that she could not then preserve such an unrestrained intercourse with her beloved friends Mrs. Aubrey and Caroline, as she then enjoyed; yet when this circumstance glanced on her recollection, she endeavoured to submit to it with cheerfulness.

After a visit of some length, the venerable brother and sister left her; and whilst they were conversing in private with Mrs. Aubrey, Caroline ran to her friend, and informed her that she had received a letter from Cecil, enclosing one for herself.

"For me!" repeated Laura, blushing.

"Yes," returned Miss St. Orme; "read, and you will discover how he has been employing himself."

Laura

Laura read, and trembled.

"Applied to the Marquis!" she exclaimed.

"You did not send to forbid him, you know," returned Caroline, smiling.

"But so immediately!" said Laura; "surely it was yet too early! He should have waited at least——"

"He thought differently," interrupted her friend, "because it is known that before I was allowed to attend you, he was constantly at the gate, repeating enquiries that betrayed his sentiments; and you may observe he says it appeared to him that he could not from thence too soon endeavour to obtain the sanction he wished for; neither was his application personal, but through our good Mr. Aubrey and Lord John."

"Oh, it was too early!" repeated Laura, with unfeigned chagrin: "at such a moment the Marquis must suppose——"

"Here is Mrs. Aubrey," interrupted Caroline; "appeal to her decision."

The judgment of her older friend calmed her inquietude, and gave her to understand that

that if she entirely approved the pursuit of Mr. St. Orme, the Marquis and his family, far from being distressed at his immediate application, were relieved from much anxiety, of which she had been the object.

"They wish to see you eligibly and happily established," continued Mrs. Aubrey; "and they are so earnest to give you pretensions in the eye of the world, that your portion, which will be very considerable, was already ascertained by Lord John and his sister, even before the communication made by our friend Cecil to my good man; since which, I find they have even decided to increase it."

"But the approbation of Sir William," resumed Laura; "can it be obtained?"

"Is it for him to object to a wife for his son," returned Miss St. Orme, "well educated, amiable, and virtuous, and who will do honour to the family name? Cecil will, however, employ every means to procure his approbation, and I am sure he will succeed."

Laura was far from feeling equally sanguine upon the subject; and the stigma cast

cast upon her by her birth, at this moment particularly mortified and distressed her; but as she reflected during the night upon every circumstance that had occurred to her from her first remembrance, she acknowledged, with gratitude and affection towards the memory of her mother, that her patience, her precepts, her subsequent example, her unwearied assiduity in forming her mind, her self-sacrifice, and tender yet judicious fondness, had amply atoned for the injury her deviation from virtue, so immediately repented, had done to society, and to the child she had thus carefully reared and instructed; and she considered the levity, the follies, the imprudence, the alternate neglect, and yet more baneful indulgence of such mothers as the unhappy Lady Bellingham, even before she had forfeited the opinion of the world—the unpardonable want of attention in suffering the familiar attendance of depraved female servants, and the appointment of worthless preceptors, to be injuries of a still more serious nature.

At the hour appointed by Lady Betty, Mr.

Mr. Aubrey appeared, to conduct Laura and her friends to town. On quitting the house she shed a tear; but soon overcame her sadness, in compliment to her companions, whose solicitous attentions well merited the effort.

The carriage proceeded immediately to Bellingham House, a part of which had been hastily fitted up by the express desire of Lady Betty, for the reception of the Marquis; because she could not endure that he should descend to a less superb residence.

Here Mrs. Aubrey and Caroline made their adieus; and Laura in some perturbation embraced them both: the sight of the mansion revived unpleasant ideas; and, amidst many others, the image of Lady Harriet Clinton most unwelcomely obtruded itself. In a low and trembling voice she asked of Mr. Aubrey where her Ladyship then was; and learned to her extreme satisfaction, that she was yet abroad, and would not probably occasion the friends of the Marquis any further inquietude.

Before

Before she could attain the apartment where Lord Bellingham awaited her, she heard the carriage of her friends quit the court-yard; and sighing at the separation she could not avoid regretting, she passed on with unassured steps; and on beholding her father, sunk almost fainting in his arms.

The Marquis appeared shocked and confused: he sighed, and remained for some moments silent, and Laura was wholly unable to address him. At length he enquired, in a voice of more affection and interest than she had yet ever heard him use to herself, if she were regaining her health and spirits.

"You have had a sad, sad office, Laura!" he continued; "but you are an amiable and good girl, and have the satisfaction of reflecting that you have done even more than was requisite to prove your tenderness——others have done less!"

Laura, distressed to observe a tear upon his cheek, could not reply to such an observation as this; but she silently kissed his

his hand: and in a few moments, to her extreme relief, he recovered from his emotion, and mentioned to her that she was to reside for the present with his uncle John and Lady Betty, with whom she was deservedly, he said, a favourite.

"There also," he added, "you will find my little forlorn Emily."

Laura wept; and seeing her much affected, he reverted to subjects less distressing: but during the whole interview, St. Orme and his application were not spoken of—a silence from which, notwithstanding the assertion of Mrs. Aubrey, Laura did not augur well: her perturbation, had increased every moment, in the expectation of a discussion so interesting to her, till at length the Marquis was alarmed at her changing aspect; and ordering a carriage, conducted her himself to the house of Lord John.

Disordered and fatigued, she received permission to retire almost immediately to her apartment, where Lady Emily, whom she wished and dreaded to see, was conducted to her; and when the first painful reflections

reflections occasioned by the meeting, were past, Laura endeavoured to find consolation in her caresses and society, for her ineffectual efforts to preserve her brother.

CHAP. XIII.

LITTLE Emily had scarcely quitted her, when Laura received a congratulatory visit from Miss Winteram, who was now doubly complacent and obsequious, both on account of the increasing importance of the young favourite in the family of her patroness, and that the ancient virgin fully believed the youth for whom she sighed, had intended to prove his loyalty to her, by rejecting the hand of her rival.

Miss Winteram, however, soon made her withdrawing curtsy, and was succeeded by a much more welcome guest: this was Fanny

Fanny Meedon, who, having learned the expected arrival of Laura in town, had ventured to call at the door, in the intention of merely requiring from Dolly intelligence of the health of her friend, of which she might be assured of the accuracy; but Mrs. Maunder, without thinking of submitting the question to Lady Betty, instantly conducted her to her young Lady, because she knew Miss Meedon was much in the favour and confidence of Laura, and that she believed her visit would give her satisfaction: and in this idea Dolly was entirely right.

In a conversation unreserved on either side, Laura learned that the household of which poor Fanny so unhappily formed a part, was still in the usual train; but that Lady Mary Mornay had become entirely insupportable, from having failed in a furious attack upon the heart of Biranly, when unfortunately she happened to have betted to a considerable amount upon her undoubted success. The Embletons were engaged, Fanny added, in a lawsuit that involved their whole fortune; and Lady Augusta

Augusta was on the eve of marriage with a man of more property than rank, whom she already affected to despise and ridicule.

"Tell me, my dear Miss Meedon," said Laura, "did not the disappointment of Lady Mary originate with yourself?"

"I should accuse you of great affectation or insincerity," replied she, "on hearing that enquiry, did not the circumstances of our unexpected meeting give it some sort of colouring: yet the fair Laura must know that I have now no influence over the views of Captain Biranly. Two years since indeed, I was silly enough to believe from his own assertions, that I was the chosen empress of his mutable affections: I was at that time in the very enviable situation of governess in a family to which he is allied; and my destiny appeared so very melancholy and deplorable, that as he is really good-natured, I suppose he mistook compassion for affection."

"Is it possible," exclaimed Laura, "that in a family of reasonable beings

your merits and virtues could not claim proper attention, or proper treatment?"

Fanny smiled.

"I have a great inclination," said she, "to give you a slight sketch of my adventures, when I was driven by the same sort of conduct you have witnessed, from the roof of my mother, to make my *début* in life, as preceptress to children of distinction: in this ostensible character I have been mantua-maker, milliner, semstress, clear-starcher, nursery maid, and lady's maid, though at the same time for talents and accomplishments I was expected to be a perfect female Crichton. But the most insupportable of my employments was that of writing sentimental letters, verses on given subjects, and *impromptu* epigrams, which I was required to do by one of my patronesses, who unfortunately for me happened to be a professed *bel-esprit*; and really I have sometimes sat crying with vexation, and hammering at a rhyme, with her Ladyship at my elbow, watching with impatient anger the 'fine

frenzy' of my poetic eye, until I have almost dropped from my chair with fatigue, chagrin, and embarrassment. From another house I was driven, because I positively refused to assist an intrigue, of which I was to endure the obloquy; and I afterwards found that the lady, who is the daughter of a man of very high distinction, though married to a commoner, actually supplied my vacated post, from ti[illegible] recommendation of the woman who nursed her in her lyings-in, who having recently performed the same office for the young woman who was to be the governess, observed to her Ladyship that she would have the girl under her thumb: and besides, as Miss was only the daughter of a valet, she would never have to endure any airs and impertinence from her."

The little history of poor Fanny was at this moment interrupted by the entrance of Lady Betty; who, as she passed to her dressing-room to attire herself for the afternoon, thought proper to enquire in person how Laura found herself.

Her Ladyship testified much surprise on

beholding a stranger with the invalid; whilst Laura, apprehensive that her friend would not be received the better for being announced as the daughter of Mrs. Meedon of —— Street, merely mentioned her name; and, as she expected, Lady Betty was not sufficiently enlightened by this slender introduction, to venture any very dignified impertinence, though she shrewdly suspected from the modest air of the stranger, that she was *no great things.*

In five minutes after Fanny withdrew; and Laura was then compelled to give a very particular history of her birth and parentage, which she endeavoured to qualify, however, by adding that Miss Meedon was very much respected and esteemed by Mrs. Aubrey.

"Mrs. Aubrey—Mrs. Aubrey," muttered Lady Betty, very much dissatisfied, "is a good sort of person, and a woman of very decent family, to be sure; but there's a wide difference between her opinions and mine!"

Laura had not any difficulty in assenting

ing to this; but Lady Betty, without waiting any reply, departed to fulfil the antiquated duties of her toilet.

Since the interview with her father, Laura had felt uneasy and anxious upon the subject that most occupied her; but her inquietude at his silence was relieved the next morning by Mrs. Aubrey, who explained to her that the Marquis had forborne to mention the application of St. Orme, because he thought she appeared too weak and ill to sustain any agitation.

"But my friend Cecil," added this amiable woman, "is too impatient to endure any further suspense; and I am at once his ambassadress, that of your father, and of my good man, who all anxiously await your decision in this important affair: if it should be what we wish, St. Orme and Mr. Aubrey will instantly leave town on a visit to Sir William. Tell me then, my fair friend, am I permitted to give the signal for this journey, or must I send the lover himself to plead his cause, and allow Caroline to execute on your

devoted head all the vengeance she meditates, if you do not instantly relieve his impatience and her own?"

Laura suffered her to comprehend that there was not any absolute necessity either for pleading or punishment: and Mrs. Aubrey carried back so favourable an answer, that St. Orme, however earnest to prosecute his intended journey, could not think of departing until he had first thanked Laura for her ready acquiescence and unaffected approbation.

But Lady Betty, notwithstanding her secret exultation at the prospect of an establishment for the *child*, which would shew that coxcomb Davison that he had behaved like a fool, and a blockhead, and an ungrateful knave—and notwithstanding that she sanctioned it so far as to produce twenty thousand pounds, and a number of very ill-set jewels, for the young favourite, as a mark of her friendship, without *detriment*, as she observed to her brother John, to what others might chuse to do for her, yet her Ladyship thought it would be very indecorous and indecent

to

to receive any particular attention from the suitor, until every ceremonial was previously adjusted, the licence and ring procured, and every thing in short, so entirely settled, that he could not by any means recede: otherwise, as she justly remarked, the child might be left in the lurch, and her friends, who ought to have known better, being older, wiser, and more experienced, would be blamed for making her too cheap.

As no one wished to offend her Ladyship by a direct opposition to this plan, Mrs. Aubrey was deputed to submit to her, as a point of etiquette, whether Miss St. Orme might not expect that Laura should personally acknowledge the many attentions she had received from her, now that she was sufficiently recovered to take the air: and Lady Betty instantly perceiving the propriety of the measure, thanked Mrs. Aubrey for the hint, which she protested had not before struck her, and assented; because she knew that Caroline and her brother did not inhabit the same house.

In this visit Laura met her transformed censor; but though she had always much admired him in his rigid costume, she was not by any means displeased at the change.

St. Orme informed her that at the instigation of his friend and adviser, Mr. Aubrey, he had consented to undertake the proposed journey, though he had originally meant to have written to his father, to obtain an approbation her friends thought necessary, and which might perhaps enable him to offer an immediate establishment on the scale he wished.

"But," he added, "the only difference the result of this step can make with me, is a competence until the estates to which I am heir, revert to me, or so great an incompetence of worldly goods, as I fear the Marquis and Lord John will not think sufficiently atoned for, by better prospects, and an affection as faithful and confirmed as it is tender and disinterested. Consider then, dearest Laura, if I should return without the happiness of being enabled to meet the generous offers of your frends,

friends, as I could hope, can you consent to retire with me from that world in which we could not exist according to the pretensions we might otherwise justly form, without comparative poverty; or, if thus returning, the Marquis and Lord John advise that the union I solicit should be deferred to a more distant period, or to an opportunity they might suppose more favourable, would you still allow me to think you mine, and condescend to await the coming of a more propitious day?"

"Has Caroline been unfaithful to her trust then," asked Laura, smiling, "that you doubt this? When she insinuated herself into my willing confidence, did I betray a thought, a hope, a wish, which her ready eye did not seize, and her hand transcribe?—Ah, surely not! Why else did you so often thank me for concessions which I scarcely knew I had made? But her quick discernment shall no more avail her; for I confess all she would divine, and readily accede to all you have asked, which I hope will not be incompatible

with my duty and gratitude to my noble and generous protectors."

With this assurance, St. Orme departed less reluctantly; and Laura endeavoured to console herself as much as possible for his absence, by the society of his sister, which Lady Betty very kindly allowed her to seek, and by that of Mrs. Aubrey, who now, spite of the generous satisfaction she experienced at the hoped for happiness of her young friends, began to cast many an anxious thought towards Adwan.

The return of Mr. Aubrey and St. Orme, which Laura equally wished and dreaded, was protracted beyond the time mentioned by Cecil as the utmost limits of his absence; and Caroline, as well as her trembling friend, deprecated the apprehended cause of a delay that appeared to their alarmed imaginations very unpropitious. But at length their fears were dispelled by the appearance of the travellers, and the intelligence they communicated.

St. Orme indeed could only speak of his approaching happiness, and his delight at

at again beholding Laura as his own: but from Mr. Aubrey, who was rather more collected, her friends learned that Sir William, after some hesitation, had at length consented to transfer to his son an estate of about fifteen hundred a year, a few miles distant from that on which he resided himself, that Cecil might be enabled to make an immediate settlement upon his future bride; requesting only in return, that they would properly acknowledge, and occasionally visit their mother-in-law, who had conducted herself, Mr. Aubrey added, with much decency and decorum, but had not yet been recognised by certain high-blooded ladies in the neighbourhood.

Sir William further stipulated that the marriage festivities,-which he desired might be very magnificent, for which purpose he proposed to make his son an answerable present, and to which Lady St. Orme was to be invited, should be celebrated at the ceded mansion.

Upon these conditions, he transmitted to his intended daughter-in-law, his appro-

bation and his blessing, and assured her of his future favour.

Lady Betty, who found this answer and these conditions, not quite so outrageous as those of her godson, received them without much discontent; though she secretly thought it rather impertinent and disrespectful that Sir William had not instantly and eagerly acceded to any proposition from the Marquis of Bellingham, Lord John, and Lady Betty Traherne.

Laura now immediately wrote an account of her prospects to Mrs. Hamilton, who was attending her brother at the Bristol Hot Wells, whither, as a last and almost hopeless resort, his physicians had sent him, to repair if possible the effects of his irregularities; and she received in return an answer of sincere congratulation both from Mrs. Hamilton and her husband.

As for Captain Rothemere, she had entirely forfeited his favour and esteem the moment he discovered that she had rejected the honourable pursuit of Lord Glendarvon,

Glendarvon, from whom he would have fully expected the re-establishment of his fortune and his renown, had she not according to his idea, and according to the exact manner in which that idea was expressed—"kicked down his good luck and her own at one leap!"

Fanny Meedon, who generously rejoiced at the happiness of Laura, reported to her the consternation and angry incredulity of the society, at her good fortune in captivating the handsome Cecil St. Orme, who was now, however, represented as a brute, an ill-tempered cynic, and a disinherited heir: but Mr. Nevare, who had contrived to establish himself as an admitted lounger at the fire side of Mr. Aubrey, in quality of friend to St. Orme, put the fair household in ——— Street to despair, by reporting that the bride and bridegroom would obtain an immediate establishment of five thousand a year, independent of an immense sum of ready money from the old brother and sister.

And this affirmation, in which he did not entirely do honour to his system of

truth-telling, was uttered with so serious and assured an air, that the Embletons, Lady Mary Mornay, and their companions, with rage and conviction in their hearts, and disbelief on their lips, protested that to be exiled from London, which they perfectly well understood to be the case, they would reject the most splendid establishment that could possibly be offered.

Laura not only insisted that Miss Meedon should officiate as bridemaid at the marriage ceremony, but with the approbation of St. Orme, prevailed with her to accompany them to their residence in Herefordshire, to remain there until they returned to town themselves: and poor Fanny with some difficulty obtained the consent of her mother to this arrangement, which created numberless sneers and infinite *persiflage* when it became known to her fair inmates, from whom the luckless young woman was happy to escape without some apprehended catastrophe, when an accidental circumstance informed Lady Mary that she had once

obtained

obtained the envied attention of Captain Biranly, which she still suspected her to possess.

Before Laura left London, Mrs. Forster was amply rewarded by Lord John Traherne for her attachment to his adopted daughter; and from Laura herself she received a gratification for the fidelity and affection she had ever testified for her mother: but this good woman was still more delighted with the kindness and remembrance of her young Lady, and the happy destiny that appeared to await her.

The bridal party consisted of Mr. Aubrey and his amiable Lady, who were induced by the occasion, and still more by the earnest entreaties of their young friends, to prolong their absence from their little ones, and had consented to pass a month with them; Caroline St. Orme, who was not sorry to be thus personally reconciled to her father, Horace Nevare, and Miss Meedon.

The Marquis had promised when the first

first ceremonials were past, to join them with his little Emily, of whom he now appeared very fond: but Laura and St. Orme could not by the most respectful entreaties induce Lord John or his sister to quit their dwelling.

His Lordship pleaded his recent fatigue and inquietude, and Lady Betty intimated that as she certainly could not condescend to speak to, or notice such a personage as the present wife of Sir William, she had better stay where she was: a plea that was secretly admitted by every one without much reluctance of belief.

The only anxiety of St. Orme now arose from the fear that Laura would find the expected communication with his mother-in law unpleasant and disgusting: but she endeavoured to dissipate this uneasiness the moment she discovered it, by asserting that with his society and that of Caroline, as a compensation, she could well command all the patience that might

might be necessary, even were the occasion for it much more pressing.

"But this, my dear Cecil," continued she, "will not be quite a domestic evil with us; our home will be a happy one, I hope, and our fire side, even without a guest, cheerful and placid: and I have learned to think that all evils are light that are not domestic. Besides, I shall respect Lady St. Orme," she added, "as the source of my happiness: had not Caroline quitted her home, I should not probably have had the dear advantage of being known to you and her; and perhaps, had your father married more prudently himself, he might not so readily have assented to your union with a little nobody. Thus regarding Lady St. Orme as my good genius, I have already a predilection for her; and I hope we shall become good friends and amicable neighbours."

St. Orme admired and applauded her sentiments; and Caroline repeating the last part of the sentence as her own wish with,

with respect to her new mamma, declared she would live with her brother and her beloved Laura, not only until they were fatigued with her society, but until they actually turned her out of their house.

"I should be sorry for that," replied Laura, with a laughing mien, "because you would then live with us many, many years—longer than would meet the approbation of our friend Horace, who would be very glad to transplant you to a household of his own, I believe."

This supposition was soon confirmed by the lips of the truth-teller, and Caroline did not absolutely decline his suit; perhaps from an apprehension that he might execute a menace which he declared would be the consequence of her scorn—a menace of returning instantly to town, giving the history of the nuptials *en travestie*, and swearing that he had inexorably rejected the offered hand of the fair Caroline St. Orme, with a hundred thousand pounds.

The

The meeting between Sir William and his children was less embarrassing and unpleasant than each of the party had pictured it in their imagination. He was much pleased with the manners and the appearance of Laura; and Lady St. Orme extremely gratified by her complacency and respect, conciliated the good understanding already prevailing between them, and openly expressed her admiration and regard. So that St. Orme began to think her Ladyship a very passable sort of personage, and Caroline declared she was improved beyond credibility.

The splendour of the entertainments, and the presence of the Marquis, who arrived ere they were wholly concluded, accomplished the earnest wish of Sir William, whose Lady was now universally visited and regarded as the acknowledged and reputed mother of his amiable offspring.

Lord Bellingham found repose in the mansion and in the affection of his daughter: and but for the recollection of the follies

follies and imprudence into which he had plunged, at the hazard of losing both fame and fortune, he would there have found happiness. His abode at Castle St. Orme he prolonged to some months, and was then compelled to return to town, to assist in regulating his affairs: in his absence Lord John had been indefatigable on this point, and then made a much better report to his nephew than he had expected.

Whilst Miss Meedon was yet with her friend, she again encountered her *volage*, Captain Biranly; who, finding her wonderfully embellished by her peaceful life, and the distinguishing kindness of St. Orme and his family, again offered her his truant heart: but Miss Meedon, as well as Laura, had very fully proved the important superiority of domestic happiness over every other advantage, and she preferred incurring the danger of becoming what the amiable creatures at the house of her mother already denominated her—"a forlorn old maid," rather than accept

accept the title of wife, without some prospect of obtaining a sufficient competence for a matrimonial arrangement, or a husband with more steady and permanent views and principles.

To the great surprise of the *society*, however, this prospect soon presented itself; and the pleasing disposition and manners of Miss Meedon not only established her very happily, but enabled her to withdraw her mother from the misery annexed to her situation, which until she had done, she could not enjoy her own emancipation.

Lady Melville, reprobated and despised in her native country, affected to quarrel with its climate, which alone she pretended to fly from, and passed the remnant of her days in a foreign land, without one consoling reflection to gild her declining years; and with the mortifying recollection of having ultimately failed in every selfish object, for which the mind of the once lovely and innocent Marchioness of Bellingham had been warped to dissimulation.

mulation, artifice, and hypocrisy, that blight every virtue of which they make the display, and foster every vice they are meant to conceal.

Lady Ronald, not possessing the sensibility of her unhappy sister, and not being a mother, supported with more fortitude a blasted character, and the contempt that accompanies it: she was divorced from her husband soon after her mother had quitted England, and without any painful feeling of remorse, joined a most infamous party, consisting of a widowed Countess, her son, his mistress, and a young and beautiful daughter, who subsist not many hundred paces from the western gate of the metropolis, by keeping a Faro-table, at which many a heedless youth is undone.

Lady Sophia did not long survive the disgrace of her family; and her sister Madalina, imprudent, but not vicious, stopped short of the dreadful precipice of infamy: but she is united to a fool, who has not discernment enough to appreciate any sacrifice she may make to propriety

and

and theopinion of the world, by controuling an expensive and thoughtless taste; and as he is not compelled by any superior power to make the same offering to prudence, he daily reduces his fortune, and finding his indulgencies abridged in the same proportion, he is a capricious, violent, and parsimonious tyrant in his own family, and a very complacent, credulous dupe to those who assist to pillage and ruin him.

Such are the destinies of four women, who might have become the admiration and the honour of their country, and an example to their sex: the younger sisters were the victims of maternal indifference and neglect; but Lady Bellingham, from a fatal perversion of the candour and simplicity which is never torn from a youthful breast, without wresting likewise every good principle from the mind, very early became a lovely and smiling cemetery of departed equity and virtue; and was urged to her destiny by the restless and impatient spirit of her mother, who knew

not

not how to submit with calm dignity to an outrage of fortune, and was not aware that real greatness and superiority of mind do not consist in enlarging our plans and projects until they reach the confines of guilt, but in confining our views and wishes strictly within the limits of justice, reason, and virtue.

FINIS.

LANE, MINERVA-PRESS, LEADENHALL-STREET.

This book is given special protection for the reason indicated below:

Autograph	Giftbook
Association	Illustration
Condition	Miniature book
Cost	✓Original binding or covers
Edition	Presentation
Fine binding	Scarcity
Format	Subject

L82—5M—1-52—49125